Charmed

Let Gorgons Be Gorgons

A NOVEL

PAUL RUDITIS

BASED UPON THE TELEVISION SERIES CREATED BY

CONSTANCE M. BURGE

Charmed™

LET GORGONS BE GORGONS

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HarperCollins e-books

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CHAPTER 1

“I’m telling you, Phoebe. This is how the world ends. Not with a bang, but with a PR nightmare.” Mika Yoshida slumped back in the guest chair of Phoebe’s office, conceding defeat.

The publicist for *The Bay Mirror* wasn’t usually a drama queen, so Phoebe tried to hear her out even though it was becoming increasingly difficult to take the problem seriously. “I’ve been to the end of the world,” Phoebe said, only slightly joking. “It had very little to do with public relations.”

Mika glared at her. “You’re making fun of me.”

“I’m making fun of the *situation*,” Phoebe corrected. “I get that it’s your job to handle these things. You know how much I appreciate your work. Readership for *Ask Phoebe* doubled after you started here. But no, I don’t take what you’re saying right now very seriously.”

“*Five* couples.” Mika pounded her fist on Phoebe’s desk to punctuate the statement. “Five couples broke up in the past week—”

“Couples break up all the time. If it didn’t happen I wouldn’t have an advice column.”

Mika plowed on as if Phoebe hadn’t said anything. “And what did these five couples have in common? They were all married in a ceremony presided over by *The Bay Mirror’s* resident expert on love. The headlines practically write themselves. Our competitors are going to have a field day.”

“Which is precisely why I never should have agreed to that photo op in the first place. Who gets married in a mass wedding officiated by a

newspaper columnist ordained over the Internet?" Phoebe rifled through her desk in search of a pencil. She didn't write anything out longhand, but she'd developed an annoying habit of chewing on one while she wrote. Phoebe had gone through two boxes of pencils while working on her book.

"The Church of Love and Light is a well-respected, non-denominational organization." Mika could barely keep her face straight.

Phoebe pulled out relatively fresh pencil with barely any teeth marks. "It was forever ago. I'm surprised these marriages have lasted as long as they have, to be honest. I wouldn't have given half of them a week. The better question is why are you stalking these couples in the first place?"

"I wanted to do a follow up story. A kind of 'where are they now?' article showing how you've inspired their happy marriages. I didn't realize that inspiration had an expiration date."

Phoebe placed the pencil behind her ear. She didn't have time for this. She'd been so busy with the girls and the ghouls lately that she'd gotten behind in her work. Elise still had some stockpiled articles she kept on hand in case of magical distractions, but Phoebe needed to get ahead for future issues. The stack of letters on her desk was practically demanding to be read. And that was nothing compared to the inbox full of emails.

Phoebe got up and politely—though not so subtly—helped Mika out of the guest seat. "It is a little weird that they all decided to file for divorce this week," she conceded. "But I wouldn't call it a PR nightmare yet."

"In the *making*," Mika insisted. "I said it has the *potential* to be a PR nightmare. It's my job to stay on top of these things."

Phoebe led her to the door. "And you're really good at your job. Now that you've alerted me to the issue, I'll keep an ear out for any other breakups. Maybe some of these people have written in about their problems and I can do my own follow up in the column exploring the challenges of maintaining a marriage."

Mika's eyes lit up. "I can spin that."

"I have no doubt." Phoebe gave Mika a gentle push out of her office. "Now go head off some other PR emergency. I hear the new sports reporter has some questionable thoughts on women as professional athletes."

Mika sighed. "You joke, but that's why Elise had to fire the last sports reporter."

Phoebe watched her friend walk off with newfound determination. She didn't envy the publicist's job. Mika took the paper's failures personally. It got worse every time someone posted an article online about how newspapers were a dying industry. It was almost as if Mika felt it was solely her responsibility to keep *The Bay Mirror* in business. Ever since Phoebe's column of advice to the lovelorn had become one of the most popular sections of the paper, the publicist went into overdrive when anything happened to threaten it. Thankfully, Elise usually kept her in check.

The Bay Mirror's editor-in-chief was fairly mellow about the newspaper business. Elise Rothman had seen so much in her career that she used to claim that she was prepared for anything, no matter how bizarre. Back then, Elise had never anticipated just how unprepared she was to discover the secret that Phoebe had been keeping from her for years: that she and her sisters were witches. Elise recovered from the shock quickly—the circumstances had demanded it—but it was a memorable milestone in their relationship. It was also the last time Elise had ever mentioned that she was prepared for anything.

Phoebe was about to start on her pile of letters when an outburst of laughter caught her attention. Normally, she was able to ignore the typical commotion from the bullpen. Reporters were always calling attention to themselves by reacting to something or other. But this time, the noise piqued Phoebe's interest when she saw a familiar freelance photojournalist leaning against the desk of the paper's political reporter.

Phoebe had noticed a love connection forming between Rachel and Jal weeks ago while the pair had looked over photo selects for one of his articles. As the paper's resident love expert, Phoebe had made it a personal mission to nurture that budding relationship. A small part of her knew she should just let nature take its course, but her meddlesome tendencies proved to be a louder voice in her head.

The potential pair was hunched over something so funny that it clearly warranted further attention. Phoebe dropped her pencil on the desk and went out to join them, putting off the stack of letters just a bit longer. "What's so funny?"

"This!" Jal held out Rachel's digital camera. His body was shaking so hard with laughter it was impossible to make out the image on the screen.

Phoebe leaned in. "What is it? I can't tell."

"Let me." Rachel grabbed her camera and Phoebe felt a jolt of pleasant emotion as the pair's hands touched. Even someone who wasn't an empath would have noticed it. Rachel and Jal were clearly on their way to coupledom on their own, without any help from Phoebe.

Rachel held out the camera. "Does this statue look familiar?"

Now that the screen was still, Phoebe could finally make out the image. The stone carving of a man in a suit appeared to be at the Presidio. She could see the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. "It looks like… Congressman Ward?"

"The likeness is uncanny," Rachel said.

"It's the expression on his face that sells it." Jal said through the laughter as Rachel joined back in. "Like he has a permanent stick up his butt. I want to go down there and leave birdseed all over it so the pigeons can go to town."

Phoebe didn't share in their amusement. Years of experience with the supernatural raised her warning level without the need for a premonition.

Random statues of living politicians didn’t often turn up in parks on their own. Phoebe held out a hand, hoping to determine if her suspicions were justified. “Can I get a closer look?”

“Sure.” Rachel handed over the camera while suppressing a last few giggles.

Phoebe enlarged the image on the screen. They were right. It looked exactly like Ward, at least the photos Phoebe had seen of the man. The statue even matched his usual dour expression, but with just the barest hint of what could be surprise in the eyes. That little bit of shock added to Phoebe’s concern. She had to be absolutely sure.

Phoebe concentrated on the image, forcing herself to see beyond the picture, beyond the pixels. The world around her faded and suddenly she was in the congressman’s California office, at least in her mind.

It was nighttime. Late. The congressman’s staff was long gone. Ward sat at his desk, dressed as if it was still the workday. He hadn’t even loosened his tie. That was no surprise. Ward wasn’t the casual type in his personality or his politics. If he had his way, no one in the country would be casual about anything. The congressman was preoccupied with drafting laws to ensure the public had no right to do anything. Phoebe was surprised that a progressive city like San Francisco had elected such a closed-minded politician, but she reminded herself that his district was actually outside of town in one of the more cloistered areas.

In her vision, Phoebe saw the congressman stand to greet someone entering his office. She wished she could see through his eyes to know who it was, but she couldn’t control that aspect of her vision. Still, it was unusual for her not to see more. The visitor might have been using some kind of cloaking spell to keep prying eyes from getting a full picture. Phoebe concentrated, but the vision remained incomplete.

The congressman did not come out from behind his desk, keeping it between himself and his seemingly unexpected visitor. There was no offer of a warm greeting to whoever had come in. Ward wasn't overtly angry about the late-night intrusion, more like mildly annoyed. The practiced veil of the politician couldn't hide his true feelings, but he tried to adopt a fake smile to cover his displeasure; couldn't risk offending a potential voter in the next election. Phoebe's vision didn't include sound, so she wasn't privy to the conversation, but it seemed innocuous enough.

The sudden change caught Phoebe by surprise, just as it did the congressman. One moment, Ward was speaking and the next he was frozen in stone. He barely had time to react. Only the barest hint of surprise registered in his granite eyes.

Phoebe came out of the vision to find Rachel and Jal staring at her. She was used to this. It happened from time to time. Her coworkers didn't know she'd just had a vision of the past. From their perspective, Phoebe had tensed up and then zoned out. Depending on how long she'd been in the vision, they might have feared she'd had some kind of stroke.

Phoebe laughed, hoping to break the tension as she handed the camera back to Rachel. "Perfect likeness. He should find a way to use it in his next campaign."

Jal turned to his computer and brought up his contact list. "I'm going to see if I can get a statement out of the congressman's office. Nobody seems to know where the statue came from or why it's in the middle of the Presidio."

"Maybe I can get a shot of the congressman standing beside it." Rachel suggested, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We can ask readers to see if they can tell the real from the fake."

"Better hurry," Jal said. "I'm sure the groundskeepers will be carting it away soon."

Phoebe backed away from Jal’s desk. “I just remembered the girls have a doctor’s appointment this morning. If Elise is looking for me, tell her I’ll be back later.”

Phoebe didn’t wait for the pair to respond before heading out. She tapped her phone awake as she left the bullpen and pressed Paige’s name while waiting for the elevator. If Paige was free, she could orb into the building, grab Phoebe, and get them both to Piper’s before the elevator reached the first floor. The doors opened the same moment Paige answered the call.

“Tell me your kids are in daycare at Magic School today,” Phoebe said as she stepped into the elevator.

“They are,” Paige replied. “I’m supposed to meet a new Charge in an hour. I’m guessing my plans just changed?”

“That would be a safe bet,” Phoebe said. “Come get me. I’m in the elevator at work.”

“On my way.”

Phoebe ended the call as the familiar white/blue orbs began to collect at the top of the elevator. Having a sister who could teleport at a moment’s notice had its perks. It wouldn’t be long before they knew what kind of danger the day held in store for them. It seemed unlikely that Phoebe would be getting to that stack of letters anytime soon.

CHAPTER 2

Brilliant blue/white orbs collected in the air above the green grass of the Presidio, bringing a supernatural element to the picturesque natural setting. The Charmed Ones materialized out of those orbs with Paige in the center and Phoebe and Piper on either side ready for action in the otherwise quiet park.

The quiet but not entirely empty park.

"Quick!" Phoebe urged her sisters in a strained whisper. "Behind a tree."

Paige glanced to her right. They were already behind a tree; two trees, in fact. Paige's so-called witchlighter magic usually deposited her in discrete places where there was less chance to be seen. So far she'd never teleported into the middle of a busy street or in front of video cameras. This time was no different. She and her sisters had materialized at a point where they were hidden from the bulk of the park-goers. "What do you call this green and brown thing we're standing next to?"

Phoebe pointed to Paige's left, where a pair of police officers watched as the park's groundskeepers slid a statue onto a dolly. There were no trees in that direction, nothing to block the Charmed Ones from being seen. "Oh," Paige said as she and her sisters moved for the nearest cover.

Piper and Phoebe squeezed in behind a different tree while Paige bent down behind a large bush. The statue was too far away to see if it was the congressman, but it seemed a pretty safe bet. It was the only statue randomly hanging out on the grass in this section of the Presidio.

“Why are we hiding?” Paige asked. “It’s a public park. We have every right to be here.”

“The fewer witnesses, the better,” Piper said. “I have a feeling that statue is about to disappear.”

The trio watched as the workers loaded the heavy, human-shaped rock onto the back of a pickup truck, slamming it down on its side. The bangs and crashes as they shoved it onto the metal truck bed echoed across the Presidio.

“That’s going to leave a mark.” Paige hoped that the politician couldn’t feel anything in his stone form. Those workers weren’t exactly being gentle. Then she changed her mind when she remembered a speech she’d once caught on the news where he’d railed against the need for maternity leave, insisting that women should leave the workforce when they had children. A little pain might be good for that jackass.

“Wonder what they’re going to write in the police report,” Piper said as they watched the officers talk with the workers. She also wondered where they were planning to take the statue. Probably the local dump.

“I’ll see if Henry can get a copy,” Paige offered.

Piper shook her head. Her question has been more out of curiosity than anything else. “Don’t bother. Can’t imagine it will tell us half as much as Phoebe’s vision. All they’ve got so far is a statue in a park. Not exactly a case for the major crimes division.”

“They’re leaving,” Phoebe said as the groundskeepers and the police officers got into their vehicles.

Paige help up her hands. “You want me to—”

“Not yet,” Piper replied. Piper considered freezing everyone until they got what they needed, but then what? If the statue suddenly disappeared while the truck was parked with the officers looking right at the bed it would only lead to more questions.

The police car pulled out first, probably with the officers going off to solve some real crime. That was good. It made things much easier for the Charmed Ones. Piper waited until the truck started to pull out as well before she looked to her youngest sister. “Okay, Paige. You’re on.”

“Got it.” Paige held out her hands and concentrated on the statue as the truck began its drive along the concrete path that cut through the park. She hoped that the workers didn’t see the orbs materializing in the rear view mirror as the statue broke into tiny pieces and traveled across the field.

The stone congressman rematerialized beside Paige, in the exact spot she’d wanted it to appear. Phoebe was right. It did capture his likeness perfectly. The statue stood slightly taller than the bush Paige hid behind, but it was still hidden enough from prying eyes.

“Wonder what they’re going to think when they get where they’re going?” Phoebe said with an eye toward the truck. It was still making its way out of the park so it seemed likely the groundskeepers weren’t aware that they’d lost their cargo. It didn’t seem like they noticed the lack of weight in the bed.

“They’ll probably just be glad they don’t have to cart it off the truck,” Piper replied hopefully. The last thing she wanted was for the groundskeepers to spend the rest of the morning assuming that the statue had fallen out on the road somewhere along the way and then retracing their route.

Paige was still examining the statue. “Whoever did this to him managed to preserve his likeness perfectly. Right down to the beady little, mildly-shocked eyes.”

“It’s a work of art,” Phoebe agreed sarcastically. “So, what are we thinking? Titans again?”

“I hope not,” Piper said recalling her brief stint with goddess-like powers and a rather sour disposition. “I still get a shiver every time it

rains.”

“Should I orb him back to the Manor?” Paige asked.

“Let’s take him to Prue,” Piper suggested. “She’s been looking for a project to work on at the Nexus, something to pass the time. Besides, I don’t want this creep in my house in stone or in human form.”

Paige looked the statue in his frozen eyes and patted him on the head. “Don’t worry. We’re still going to help you. Just don’t expect our hearts to be in it.”

“Or any other part of our icky women’s bodies, either,” Phoebe said.

Paige left one hand on the top of the statue and held out her other hand to Piper while Phoebe grabbed her shoulder. She’d had more awkward orbs with larger groups of people, but she was glad they were hidden behind the bush. They must have looked ridiculous as they started to orb away.

Prue concentrated on the options laid out before her, focusing on her objective as she hunched over the table. She’d been at it for over an hour and things weren’t getting any easier. It was a challenge, but one that she had faced many times before. “I’m looking for a middle piece that’s a patch of blue sky with maybe just a wisp of a white cloud along the edge.”

Cole remained on the couch, pointedly ignoring her while he read a magazine that was several months out of date. “I already told you, I’m not helping.”

“Need I remind you the Elders specifically sent you here *to* help me?” Prue leaned around the edge of the table. “Maybe it fell on the floor.”

“With supernatural issues,” Cole reminded her. “I’m here to fight demons, not thwart one-thousand-piece puzzles.”

“Yeah, well, in between supernatural disasters, I expect we’re going to have a lot of downtime here in the middle of nowhere. Nothing wrong with taking up a hobby.” Prue didn’t see any puzzle pieces hiding on the floor. If

Cole weren't there, she would have gotten down on her hands and knees for a more thorough search, but there was only so much indignity she could handle at one time. Crawling around on the floor to find a small piece of cardboard was just past her limit.

Cole put down the magazine. "How about a hobby of trying to find a way out of this Nexus. It's not like you to give up so easily."

"Who said I gave up?" Prue asked. "Doing puzzles has always helped me concentrate. It's how I got through my senior year of college."

"I have never in my life seen you do one puzzle, Prue."

"Yeah, well, you've only known me for a short period of my life… *lives*. I have a lot of secrets you've yet to—Aha! Found it!" The missing piece was mixed into a small pile with another piece lying half-over it. She picked it up and fit it into place, adding to the sky over the ocean in her puzzle. "Only five hundred and however many pieces to go."

A collection of white/blue orbs materialized at the edge of the table and Prue stood up straight, working out the kinks in her back from leaning over for so long. "Looks like we've got company."

"Oh, thank god." Cole dropped his magazine on the coffee table and hopped up from the couch like he was ready to go somewhere. *Anywhere*.

Prue's sisters appeared out of the orbs along with a rather ugly statue. Prue took one look at it and scrunched her face to let them know how she felt about the clutter in her home. "Thanks, but I'm finished redecorating. And that piece of crap does not go with the décor."

Piper glanced over at the unfinished puzzle on the table. "Uh-oh. The puzzles are out. What's the problem?"

Prue shot a look to Cole that basically said, *See? I told you.* He just shrugged silently in response. "Same problem since day one," Prue said. "Trying to figure out a way to escape the Nexus of the All."

Phoebe picked up one of the pieces. "Any ideas?"

“Nothing yet,” Prue replied, snatching the piece out of Phoebe’s hand. Her younger sister had lost too many puzzle pieces in the past. Prue had long since tired of finishing a puzzle with two or three empty spots left over. “We’re dealing with a magic older than time. Might take a few weeks to figure it out.”

“Well, anything you need. We’re here for you,” Paige said.

“Thanks,” Prue said. It wasn’t a surprise, but was still nice to hear, especially from Paige, since they hardly knew one another. Having the time to properly develop a relationship with her youngest sister was another thing that had been stolen from Prue, first when she had died young and then when she had returned and got herself trapped at the magical Nexus that linked Earth with the Heavens and the Underworld.

It wasn’t like the stupid and often completely arbitrary rules of magic were anything new to Prue. She’d only been a witch for three years before she died, but she’d seen enough back then to get the gist of things. Bending the rules by coming back from the dead in the body of a woman who was no longer using it was obviously something that magic would find a way to balance out. Prue might have been trapped at the Nexus, but at least this way she got to see her family on occasion. That was more than she’d had before. If only they brought better housewarming presents with them.

Prue stepped up to the statue to give it a closer look. “So, who’s the guy? I assume he used to be less stonework and more flesh?”

“That’s why we’re here,” Phoebe said.

“Local politician,” Paige explained. “Long story short: the exterior finally matches his stone heart.”

“I had a vision of him being turned to stone, but didn’t see who did it,” Phoebe explained. “Of course, we have our suspicions.”

Prue laid a hand on the stone. It felt cool to the touch. “Where did it happen?”

“Looked like his office,” Phoebe said. “Sometime late last night. But then he was moved to the Presidio, like someone wanted to make sure the world saw him like this.”

“To send a message,” Cole suggested.

“But to who?” Prue asked.

“*Whom*?” Cole said with a smirk.

“Why don’t you visit the congressman’s office?” Prue said to her sisters. “You can take Cole with you. He needs to go out for his walk.”

“I’ll get my coat.” Cole was out of the room within seconds.

Phoebe smirked as she watched him leave. “Already driving each other crazy? That didn’t take long.”

“He has that effect on people,” Paige added.

“It’s not him. Not really. It’s all this.” Prue moved away from the statue. “Being dead was a nightmare for me. This is marginally better, but I want to have a life again. I want to see the world. Get a pizza.”

Paige placed a hand on Prue’s shoulder. “We can work on the world part together, but I can handle the pizza.” She orbed away.

“That’s not what I meant,” Prue said to the empty spot where Paige had stood a moment earlier.

Phoebe plopped down on the couch. “No. I like this plan. I could go for some pizza.”

Piper joined her, settling in. “Didn’t you just have breakfast?”

“We’ve traveled to the other side of the world. Where it’s *dinnertime*.”

Prue squeezed in between her sisters. “I missed you guys.”

“Group hug!” Phoebe leaned in and wrapped her arms around her sisters.

“This family does a lot of hugging.” Cole returned wearing a dark gray jacket, looking more like himself fully dressed in his impeccable suit.

Prue shook her head as Phoebe released her from the hug. “Just once I’d like to see him lounging around in sweatpants and an old T-shirt.”

Phoebe looked her ex over as well. “That suit is practically loungewear for him. Look, the pants are pleated.”

Cole was about to respond when orbs collected behind the couch, forming Paige holding a cardboard box. “Somebody order a pizza?”

“I was kidding,” Prue said as she got up and took the box from her sister. “But I’ll take it.” She waved a hand over the table and the puzzle was replaced by fine china.

“Oh! Fancy!” Phoebe sprung up from the couch and hurried to the table, opening up the pizza box. “Veggie! My favorite!” She pulled out a slice without even bothering with a plate and took a bite. “Oh! Oh! Still hot!” Phoebe was waving her hand in front of her mouth to cool herself when she caught Cole smirking at her. She shrugged and blushed. He’d certainly seen worse from her before.

“I thought we were going to the congressman’s office,” Cole said.

“Not right now,” Piper said.

“Then why did I get my jacket?”

“Why do you do anything?” Paige asked. “But we’ve got the human side of this covered. You’re better suited to the magical stuff.”

“You want me to hit the Underworld? Look into some old contacts?” Cole asked.

“We can hold off on that, too, for the moment.” Phoebe blew on her slice of pizza. “We’ve dealt with beings that could turn people to stone before: the Titans from Greek mythology. We took care of them, but there could be more on ice. I was thinking you could go check it out.”

“Take Leo,” Piper said. “He’ll know where to go.”

“Got it,” Cole said.

“He’s at Magic School,” Piper added, checking her watch. It was still set to San Francisco time. “If you go now you’ll get him during his free period.”

Cole gave a little bow as he started to fade. “I live to serve.” By the time he finished the sentence he was gone, off to Magic School.

“Sorry if he’s driving you crazy,” Phoebe said to Prue once he was far out of earshot.

Prue dug into the pizza box, pulling slices out for her other sisters and putting them on the plates she’d created out of the air. “First off, it’s not your responsibility to apologize for him. And the truth is I’d probably go crazy—well, *crazier*—if he weren’t stuck here with me. Much as I love your visits, you can’t be here every day. Now that Dad’s back home from his little vacation, it would be lonely without Cole.”

“Can’t say you’re not making the best out of a bad situation,” Paige said.

“I do what I can.” Prue lifted her slice of pizza and blew on it like Phoebe had. “Now, tell me what’s going on with all of you. It sounds like Mr. Granite can probably stay like that a bit.” Prue took a bite of pizza. It wasn’t nearly as hot as Phoebe had made it seem.

“I can’t imagine a missing congressman is a good thing,” Phoebe said. “But the world might be better off if this particular congressman stayed on ice for a while.”

CHAPTER 3

The bitter cold slapped Cole in the face the moment he faded into the ice cavern with Leo at his side. Frigid air bit into his exposed skin and right through the silk of his suit. Nothing in his current wardrobe was proper for this excursion. “Think I prefer my trips to the Underworld. At least it’s warmer. Downright hot at times, depending on what you’re doing down there.”

“We won’t be here long.” Leo wrapped his arms around himself for warmth. At least his long-sleeved flannel was slightly more appropriate for the conditions. “But yes, it was better when I had a magical ability to fend off the cold.”

“The internal warmth of the demon inside me was one small benefit of my prior existence,” Cole said. The ex-demon’s ability to teleport was one of the few powers he retained in his now undead form. His current version of a life was a far better tradeoff than when he was part-Belthazor—or carried the Source inside him. But there were times when he did miss some of the special abilities he had when he was at his most powerful. A fireball or two would have come in quite handy in this ice cave.

Cole wasn’t sure what to call himself these days. He was no longer a demon but clearly no longer mortal. He was more corporeal than a ghost, but still technically dead. “Undead” really was the most reasonable term, but that brought up images of zombies shambling along, and he still carried himself with his traditional swagger. Like Prue, he was a supernatural unicorn, incredibly rare and possibly one of a kind. It would make things

difficult if he ever decided to reapply for a driver's license, but he didn't see many government forms in his future. He was still Cole and that was all that really mattered.

Leo was already on the move, heading down an icy tunnel into the frozen unknown. "The remaining Titans should be in the general vicinity."

Cole followed. "Do you miss it?"

"Magic?" Leo asked as they moved through the cavern. "It came in handy at times. Complicated things at times too."

"Not just the magic," Cole said. "All of it. Having a calling. Being a Whitelighter. Or… I hear you were an Elder for a while too."

"And an Avatar," Leo said. "So we've got that in common. But yes, I do miss some things about the role I played in watching over the Charmed Ones. It's a good trade-off though. Growing old with Piper. Raising our family together without the Elders constantly calling me Up There. The healing power would be nice, especially when Chris was going through his daredevil stage, but I wouldn't change it for the world. Why? Are you having trouble with your new role?"

"I'm adjusting," Cole said as they came to a fork in the tunnels. "I've never been good at taking orders from someone. Just ask the Source. Oh, that's right. You can't. He's gone."

Leo moved down the tunnel on the left. "Yeah, but he'll probably be back soon. That's one power that refuses to stay vanquished. Kind of like you."

"Not good company to be in," Cole said. "But I take your point."

"This must be the place." The tunnel opened up in front of Leo, leading into an ice cavern that was decorated more like a hut in the middle of some kind of safari tour or an old adventure movie.

A wooden platform had been built on the snowy ground. The table standing on it held a large book of magic, even bigger than the Charmed

Ones' Book of Shadows. In the corner, someone had strung up a hammock as makeshift living quarters under an old umbrella that probably did little to keep ice from falling on them while they slept. Torches were stuck in the snow and lanterns hung from the walls. The magic that had created them still kept the flames alive even after all these years. It was slightly unnerving, as if the being that had enchanted them was going to return home at any moment.

Cole examined the wooden platform that bore the telltale scorch marks he assumed had once been a demon or some other practitioner of dark magic. It was doubtful anyone was coming back from that. "Ah, yes. It looks like the Charmed Ones have been here."

"This wasn't actually their doing," Leo said as he examined two human-sized gouges in the ice walls, running a hand along the frozen tombs. "I would have expected all of this to ice over again by now."

"Magical prisons don't function by real world rules," Cole said as he examined the remains of the prison. "This place held three people?"

"Two in here," Leo said. "Titans. Powerful beings that claimed to be gods. They ruled the world until the Elders intervened by granting mortals incredible powers so they could battle the Titans."

"Because the Elders never involve themselves directly when they can get other people to do the hard work for them," Cole said. "Figures."

"It's better now," Leo assured him. "Somewhat. The Elders have learned their lessons for the most part. They don't abuse their position like they used to under the guise of being above it all."

"They're still keeping Prue prisoner at the Nexus as punishment for breaking their rules."

"I don't know how much of that is their doing," Leo said. "She seems to be more of a prisoner of the magic itself, but I get your point."

Cole joined Leo at the gouges in the wall. “What did these Titans do when they finally got out?”

“Decimated the Elders,” Leo said with a note of sadness in his voice. It might have been years ago, but the pain was still there. “Whitelighters too. The Titans turned some of us to stone, which allowed them to steal our power to orb.”

“And that’s why we’re here?”

Leo shrugged as he headed to the other side of the cavern. “Someone’s got to check it out. Let’s try down that tunnel. There was a third Titan imprisoned somewhere around here. There might be others. I figure one loop around this place should tell us all we need to know. Then we can get someplace warm.”

Cole followed. He was glad to be moving again. It helped to keep the circulation flowing. In this cold, he could imagine his blood freezing, if he even had blood in his veins anymore. The whole “undead” thing was a little confusing. “You don’t sound very convinced.”

“I’m not so sure it’s the Titans,” Leo admitted. “Congressman Ward’s a mortal. The Titans were focused on magical beings. This doesn’t exactly fit their M.O.”

“We *assume* he’s a mortal,” Cole said. “You know as well as anyone that magic takes all forms.”

“True. Like I tell my students: magic can be the beauty or the beast.”

Cole smiled his familiar wry grin. “Sometimes it’s both.”

Stheno ran her fingers through her long, flowing black hair, shaking free the cobwebs she’d passed through on that last bend in the tunnel. It was something to do while she waited. Euryale had stopped once again to pull her heel out of the soft dirt. Her sister did love her stilettos. There was little

doubt in Stheno's mind that one day Euryale's love of modern fashion would be her undoing.

"Do we have to do this every year?" Stheno asked, pulling a spider free from the tangles of her hair. She considered leaving the arachnid where it was, but she preferred to behave as a human while in human form. The average person didn't usually react well to creepy crawlies in their hair. Not that there were any actual humans around to see her at the moment. But it was too easy to fall into old habits when it mattered if she grew too casual with her actions when it didn't count.

"I'm sorry." Euryale shook out her shoe in the light of her lantern. "Between the soft dirt and the tiny stones these shoes were not made for caves."

Stheno rolled her eyes. "Then change them."

Euryale let out a resigned huff of air. "Fine."

Euryale closed her eyes and concentrated. It only took a second for the black leather heals to shift into a more appropriate pair of brown hiking books. When she opened her eyes again, she seemed quite happy with her new choice of footwear, but her smile faltered as her eyes moved up to the tight skirt above them. She looked at her sister, held up a finger and shrugged an apology as she closed her eyes again. The tight skirt shifted into a pair of jeans and her blouse changed to a T-shirt. She finished off the look by having her own long, black hair pulled back into a hair clip. This time when she opened her eyes she seemed happier with the entire ensemble.

"Better?" Stheno asked.

Euryale smiled. "Much."

"I don't understand why you didn't just do that when we first entered the caves," Stheno said as she continued on down the tunnel.

“Mainly because I know it drives you crazy,” Euryale replied. “If we’re going to do this every year I might as well have some fun in the process.”

For as long as they had been sisters, Euryale had been something of a mystery. At times she seemed naïve and somewhat clueless. And yet, Stheno was fairly certain it was all an act, something to mess with her. It was Euryale’s way of standing out as the middle sister. Stheno was beyond tired of it, especially since it had only been the two of them together for the longest time.

Stheno tried to put her frustrations with Euryale out of her mind as she continued the journey. Not that she needed to concentrate on the path. They’d made this trip so many times that she could do it with her eyes closed.

The tunnels beneath the city of Athens were always cool, no matter the season, no matter the millennia. That was the one thing Stheno had come to expect whenever they visited their lost sister. It was an annual tradition, this trek to the place between the Earth and Hades, between life and death; one that usually ended with the same expected result. But this year would be different. This year, everything would change.

Stheno and Euryale had never been all the way down to Hades before. These tunnels were the closest they had ever come. It wasn’t safe for them in Hades. Not while they were still alive. Hades wasn’t exactly a high-volume tourist destination, even for Stheno or Euryale, no matter what mortals might think of them when they were in their cursed form. They’d been called demons on more than one occasion, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

It was rarely called Hades in the modern world any longer, but the sisters refused to let the name go. They held tight to their memories of the time in which they had been cursed, refusing to completely change with the times. Oh, Euryale liked the modern conveniences enough: the ease of

technology, the taste of manufactured foods. But some things were best in their original form. “Hades” was just so perfect a word whether referring to the god or his home. “The Underworld” did not have nearly the same ring to it. So very literal. Totally lacking in any creativity.

The path before them broke off into a pair of tunnels and the sisters took the one on the right without hesitation. They’d been making this trek for over a thousand years. Always on the same date, even when the world had adapted to a new calendar. This time they brought with them a hope that they had not felt in centuries. This time, they were going to reunite their family.

“Every year this journey feels shorter than the last,” Euryale said.

“The curse of immortality,” Stheno replied. “The more days behind us, the less time means in the present.”

“One would think by now that time would have lost all meaning,” Euryale said.

“It probably would if we hadn’t been counting the days since we lost our sister.”

“You’re still counting?” Euryale asked. “I gave up once we hit six digits.”

Stheno paused. “Every day. Every minute.”

Euryale tilted her head. “That’s a lot of counting. We need to get you a hobby.”

Stheno pressed on. “Once we awaken Medusa, I’ll have a new hobby.”

“Not so new. But much more fun!”

Several more twists and turns brought them to the familiar chamber where their sister’s body had been laid to rest. Over time they had carved out a fitting tribute to Medusa, the youngest of the siblings and the most famous of their trio by far. They set their lanterns on the stone pillars they had placed by the entrance to the chamber.

Medusa’s remains had been at rest in the cave for thousands of years, placed there by her sisters at the spot where Earth gave way to Hades in their homeland. They had done this in the hope that one day they could resurrect Medusa’s soul and return her to them. They had tried many, many times, and always failed.

Medusa was by far the strongest of the sisters, but the only one that was not immortal. It was that cruel twist that plagued the ancient powers throughout history. The strongest among them always possessed the most fragile weakness. Achilles and his fragile heel was just one example.

If Perseus had defeated Stheno or Euryale, they would have entered a peaceful slumber for a century or so before they reawakened. But Medusa had been gone far too long. And she had taken the strength of their union with her, leaving Stheno and Euryale mere shells of magic.

It had taken every ounce of their powers working together to turn that politician to stone. It helped that his heart was already there, at least metaphorically. Had he been a good person, Stheno wasn’t so sure their magic would have worked at all. It was an odd quirk of the curse, but one that Medusa’s skills could negate.

Stheno stood on the dirt atop her sister’s remains. She could feel their connection through the earth beneath her feet. “This is our last attempt,” she said. “If we do not succeed today, we will not return.”

Euryale hadn’t expected that. “You’re giving up? After all this time?”

“I’ll never fully give up,” Stheno said. “But if this spell doesn’t work today, I can’t imagine it ever will. We’re finally in the time when Mother Earth is at her strongest. Not since the first witch roamed the planet have women held more power in the balance of magic. The Charmed Ones protect the Innocent. Their sister is at the juncture point of the realms. All magic flows through the body of a woman. If we call on that essence to return our sister, we will have to succeed.”

“We’re hanging our hopes on a lot of power that doesn’t belong to us,” Euryale said.

“The magic belongs to everyone. We are only channeling it for a moment. No one will even notice that it is being directed our way.”

Stheno stuck out her tongue, letting the glamour that gave her the current version of the aesthetically pleasing body fall away. She could taste the magic in the air. The Charmed Ones were calling on their powers, just as she had planned it. “We must begin.”

Euryale joined her sister in the spot above Medusa’s remains. They were both in their cursed forms now. The olive-toned human skin was gone, replaced by the green scales of their reptilian bodies. Their teeth had grown longer, a pair of fangs jutting past each of their lips. The snakes that rested on their heads woke from their slumber.

Stheno and Euryale began their chant in the ancient tongue. They had recited these words so many times that by now they spoke in perfect unison, sharing the same breaths. But this time, it was different. Stheno could feel the magic—so long lost to them—flowing through both of their bodies. It came from all around them. From the air. Through the dirt. Stheno channeled it through her body and into her sister’s, focusing it back into the dirt beneath them. Their magic was connected. Their minds had become one.

Stheno and Euryale did not break concentration as they both experienced sensations they had never felt in all the prior times they had attempted to cast this spell. It was finally working. It had to be. But they would not allow their excitement to distract them from the task.

With eyes still closed, they sensed they were no longer alone. Snakes burrowed out of the walls around them, dropping to the ground and slithering to their feet. A half-dozen vipers wound around their scaly legs as

they chanted, hissing at the serpents on their heads and tapping into the magic that flowed through the sisters' bodies.

Once the vipers were filled with magic, they plunged into the earth, digging deep into the grave beneath them, using the magic to reawaken the dead.

Now that the magic was at work, they opened their eyes. Euryale could not hide her excitement, but Stheno would not even smile. She refused to get her hopes up until Medusa was back with them. Until the spell was complete.

The ground beneath them roiled as the snakes worked their magic. Stheno and Euryale each took a step back, and then another as the dirt shifted. Euryale bounced on the balls of her feet in excitement, but Stheno remained inscrutable. It wasn't until the first of the snakes reemerged from the dirt that she cracked the barest hint of a smile.

The five other snakes soon rose as well as the dirt swirled around them in a whirlpool of earth. The snakes were no longer on their own. Their bodies had fused into something solid, something familiar.

Medusa's head emerged from the vortex, awake and alert. Her claws pushed aside the dirt that refused to widen for the vortex. Like her sisters, Medusa was in her monstrous form, cursed that way by the vindictive Athena. There was confusion in her eyes, as well as fear, looks that eased as she gazed upon her sisters. A smile appeared on her lips as she continued to rise out of the ground and saw her sisters.

Only then did Stheno allow herself a full smile of her own, as Medusa stepped out from her former resting place, reunited with her family once again.

CHAPTER 4

“The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free!” Four sisters chanted together, combining the power of the Charmed Ones with a boost of magic from the Nexus channeled through Prue.

Their hands were locked together, the sisters forming a circle around the stone congressman calling on all the powers they could tap into for their spell. In the center, the gray stone began to fade in spots, turning to white, then a more flesh-like color.

“It’s working!” Phoebe said. “I can’t believe it’s working!”

“Keep chanting!” Prue said.

The sisters had been at it for at least a minute, but they continued on, buoyed by the response. The stone slowly made a shift to skin. Parts of the congressman’s body started to move.

“I don’t feel so good,” Paige said.

“We’re almost there,” Prue said. The congressman was nearly fully human again.

“I don’t think I can go on,” Piper added.

“Just a bit more,” Prue insisted.

“The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three—”

“What in the world is going on here?” The congressman’s nostrils flared as blood rushed into his face.

“Oh thank the goddess,” Phoebe said as she let out a deep sigh and let go of Piper and Paige’s hands. She grabbed for the couch behind her, trying

to steady herself before she fell over. Piper and Paige grabbed onto the nearest furniture as well. Only Prue seemed unfazed by what they had done.

"Are you okay?" Prue asked her sisters.

"Getting there," Piper said. "Let's not try that again."

"Aren't you feeling it?" Phoebe asked.

"No," Prue replied. "I'm fine. And look! It worked!" She held a hand out to the congressman who was taking in his surroundings with a sort of terrified rage in his eyes. This place looked nothing like his office.

"Who are you people?" he demanded.

Paige stood straight, the cloudiness clearing from her mind as she ignored the sputtering congressman. "Okay. That wasn't so much fun. But it saved us from having to find a fairy, a dwarf, and a leprechaun, so I consider it a win."

"And we got the congressman back," Prue said with a glance at Ward. "Well, maybe we'll say we broke even."

Congressman Ward pointed a finger at Prue. "I demand that you tell me where I am this instant, young lady."

"Did he just 'young lady' me?" Prue asked her sisters.

Paige shrugged. "He could have 'missy'ed you. That would be worse."

"Marginally," Prue said.

Piper stepped in to allow cooler heads to prevail. "It's okay, congressman. There was a little… attempted kidnapping, I guess? We took care of it. You're safe now and we'll get you right back home."

"Where you can continue to craft laws to set the women's movement back a century," Phoebe added, not nearly as under her breath as one of her older sisters might have done.

Piper glared at her. "Not. Helping."

"I knew it!" The congressman pulled out his cell phone. "This is some feminist plot to destabilize the government. I'm calling the authorities. You

tell me where I am this minute."

Prue pulled the phone out of his hand, trying very hard not to laugh in his face. "You're in a castle hovering a dozen yards above the mystical connection that links the magical realms of Earth, the Heavens, and the Underworld. Police response time is incredibly slow out here."

"Do we even get cell reception?" Paige asked.

"Yep," Phoebe said. "Just like in the Underworld."

The congressman reached for his phone again. "Now you're adding theft charges. Return my property this instant."

Prue held the phone out of reach. This would have been fun if it weren't so annoying. "Keep away" was a much more enjoyable game to play with her nieces and nephews. "Piper!"

"On it." Piper raised her hands and the congressman froze mid-shriek.

"I suddenly understand the desire to turn him to stone," Prue said, enjoying the sound of silence once more. She was beginning to rethink her stance on visitors.

"I'm thinking some kind of amnesia spell might be advisable here," Paige said.

Phoebe stepped up to the frozen congressman and gave him the once over. "I don't know. Maybe we should turn him into a woman for a day so he has a chance to see how the other half lives."

"I might know a spell," Prue said thoughtfully. "Just need to give it a little gender tweak."

Piper took her older sister by the hand, trying to discourage her from giving Phoebe or Paige the idea that they should use their magic for a teachable moment. That kind of thing hadn't gone so well for them in the past. "How about not?" Piper said. "The sooner we can be rid of this guy the better. Paige, do you think you can—"

Paige held up a hand. “Don’t say another word. I’m on it.” Paige headed out of the living room, going off toward one of the newest rooms in the palace her sister called a home.

Prue had recently created a special room for casting spells, filled with anything the witch-on-the-go might need in a pinch. She’d spent hours in there working on her problem of breaking free of the Nexus to no avail. She was glad that Paige might at least get something out of it. Amnesia spells were relatively simple. All the ingredients should probably be on hand. Anything else Paige could just orb out for. The Charmed Ones had made more than a few of those spells over the years.

“This place really does provide everything you could ever need,” Phoebe said.

“Except freedom,” Prue replied with a sigh. “I know. Broken record. Or CD. Or… what is it people are listening to their music on these days?”

Piper threw an arm around her sister. “We’ll figure this out. In the meantime, we do bring you such nice presents.”

Prue tapped the frozen congressman on the head. “Oh yes. I’ll have to return the favor some time.”

“Please don’t,” Phoebe said as Cole faded in beside her with Leo.

The former demon paused to take in the room and the frozen congressman. “Well, he’s not stone anymore. Halfway there, I guess.”

“No,” Prue said. “He’s all better. Well, he’s *himself* again. ‘Better’ is an arguable term. That’s why Piper had to freeze him.”

Cole nodded. “Got it.”

“So far as we could tell the rest of the Titans are still on ice,” Leo said. “No one seems to have been there since your visit.”

A burst of music filled the air around them as a tinny, auto-tuned voice sang out. Prue, Piper, and the guys looked around for the source of the music as if the Nexus was unleashing its next surprise on them.

“What is that horrible song?” Prue asked.

Phoebe held up her phone. “The answer to your question about what people listen to music on these days. What can I say? The girls love to dance to it.”

Phoebe checked the screen. It was Mika. Probably calling about what surely unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Still, it was an unavoidable call. “I should take this.” Phoebe waved the phone as she stepped into the next room, heading in the same direction Paige had gone earlier.

“*Seven* couples,” Mika said by way of greeting as they connected. “I called around and now it looks like seven of your couples have broken up.”

“Can you please not refer to them as my couples? This photo op was *your* idea,” Phoebe said lightly. “And it’s still not even half the number of couples you had me marry. Seriously, it’s been a few years and—”

“In the past week,” Mika said. “These seven couples broke up in the past week. If you look at all the couples you married at the press opportunity—the ones that ended their marriages before this week—it is more like half. That I could explain away with time, but…”

Phoebe didn’t like where this conversation was going. “Seven in the past week? Okay, you’ve got my attention.”

“Now do you get why I’m freaking?”

“Not entirely,” Phoebe said. Mika was reacting to the publicity implications, but Phoebe was more concerned about the larger ramifications. Seven couples that she brought together all breaking up in the same week was too big of a coincidence. Something else could be at play beyond simple relationship issues. Something with more of a magical motivation. That made things considerably harder for Phoebe to ignore.

Phoebe reached out to the magic of the universe to see if she could force a premonition revealing any magical explanation for what was going on.

Usually when she did this she needed to be near an object or a person to channel the power. Even then it was still hit or miss.

This time was a miss.

“Phoebe? Are you there?”

“Sorry, you dropped out for a moment.” Phoebe lied through the cell phone. “I’m back now.” She nodded to Paige as her sister passed holding a potion bottle with purple liquid inside. Paige smiled as she nodded to the potion. It wouldn’t be long before they could have the congressman out of their lives forever.

“Where are you?” Mika asked, pulling Phoebe back into the conversation again.

“At my sister’s.” Phoebe had no intention of telling her *which* sister. It would be a little hard to explain since Mika believed Prue was dead. She would also find it hard to believe that, even though they’d had a conversation barely an hour ago, Phoebe was no longer in San Francisco. Or the United States.

“Jal said you took the girls to the doctor?”

“The one with an office by my sister’s place.” Phoebe needed to better organize her lies. After all these years, it was a skill she should have perfected by now. “Text me the contact info for one of the couples. Time for me to do some investigative journalism.”

“You’re taking this seriously now?” Mika asked.

“I’m taking this very seriously.” It was doubtful that Phoebe would be able to use whatever she discovered for her column, but she had to do something with the information. Five couples were hard enough to dismiss considering her history. But seven in one week was just too much for her to brush off.

Phoebe ended the call and returned to the living room where her sisters and the guys huddled around the congressman. “I’m going to have to

unfreeze him to get him to drink the potion, aren't I?" Piper asked.

"We could pour it over his head, but it won't work very well that way," Paige replied.

"Maybe you could tip his head back and just spill it down his throat?" Phoebe suggested. "Or… there are other ways to give medicine to reluctant patients."

"Let's not go there," Prue replied with a nod toward Phoebe's phone. "Everything okay on your end?"

Phoebe grabbed one last slice of the cooling pizza while she filled them in on her work situation. They were all in agreement that something magical was likely at play. Phoebe could hardly remember a time when mysteries like that could be easily chalked up to odd coincidences and not something with ulterior motives that needed to be investigated. This was the life of a Charmed One.

"It's probably nothing," Phoebe said as she munched on the crust. "But I've got to check it out. Are you all okay without me here?"

Prue took the potion bottle from Paige. "We'll be fine."

"I'll call you if we find out anything else," Piper added.

Paige placed a hand on Phoebe's arm. "Need me to orb you somewhere?"

Phoebe shook her off as she started back to the next room. "That's okay. I can arrange my own transport. Enjoy the pizza!"

Phoebe waited until she had a room between herself and the others before she took a deep breath and prepared to call her husband. "C—"

"You know you don't have to hide him from me." Cole's voice came from behind her. Dead or alive, he was particularly skilled at that sneaking-up-on-people thing. "I like Coop. He's a good guy."

Phoebe shrugged. "I just didn't want him to get distracted by the pizza. Then we'd never get out of here. The man does love his pizza."

“Oh, well then. If that’s all,” Cole said.

Phoebe tilted her head. “What else would it be?”

“I just want to make sure we’re okay.”

“We’re fine,” Phoebe said. “Except that we seem to have some version of this conversation every time we get together. To be perfectly honest, I’m getting a little tired of it.”

“I didn’t ask to come back into your life,” Cole said. “I just want to make sure I’m not interfering with anything. I’m trying to be the good guy here.”

Phoebe sighed. “Stop trying. Just be good. The rest will come naturally. Now, if you don’t mind?”

Cole leaned against the doorframe and waved a hand her way. “Go right ahead. I’d love to say hi to Coop.”

Phoebe sighed again and called out into the air: “Coop!”

Her husband beamed in a moment later. Phoebe was relieved that he hadn’t been in the middle of something. It would have been awkward if she’d had to wait for him to appear. She quickly gave him a big hug. “Hi, honey!”

“Hey there,” Coop said as he returned the embrace. “I thought you were at work. I assume since we’re at Prue’s something magical is going on that needs our intervention?”

“Hello, Coop,” Cole said from behind them, holding out a hand.

Coop released his wife and took Cole’s hand. “Cole! Good to see you.” There was no suspicion in his tone. No question of why his wife’s ex was there. This was no surprise to Phoebe. Her husband knew Cole was back in her life. He trusted her.

No. All Phoebe’s issues with this situation were entirely her own. “A couple of magical things, actually,” Phoebe said, moving the subject beyond her own insecurities. “One of them I might need your help on.”

“It’s right up your alley,” Cole added with a smirk. “Phoebe seems to be all out of love.”

“Are your readers so lost without you?” Coop asked, playing along.

“Great. Just what I need: dated musical references from my childhood.”

“That’s what happens when you pick guys who lived at least a century before you were born,” Coop said.

“She does have a type, doesn’t she?” Cole added.

Phoebe shook her head. Things were so much easier when she only had one of these guys in her life at a time. She was beginning to dread the possibility that they could become friends. “Okay. This has been fun. But we’ve got to get moving. Say goodbye, Coop.”

Her husband’s smile widened. “Goodbye, Coop.”

“Our names are pretty similar too,” Cole said in response.

Phoebe let out an exasperated grunt as she grabbed her husband, roughly, by the arm. “Time to go.”

Coop gave a little salute to Cole before he and Phoebe beamed away from the Nexus.

CHAPTER 5

Having a husband that could beam around town was convenient, especially in San Francisco with its notoriously parking-challenged neighborhoods. Phoebe and Coop materialized behind a tree on a street where they would have spent a fair amount of time searching for a spot if they'd taken a more traditional mode of transportation.

The first couple on Mika's list lived in Bernal Heights, where houses were stacked like dominoes on some of the steepest hills in the city. Phoebe did not envy the movers with their truck parked at the foot of the long wooden staircase that went up to the first address on her list. The moving truck was facing down the sloping hill, presenting a difficult challenge for the vehicle's parking brake. It was going to be hard for the movers to stabilize the furniture in there.

The truck itself was a good sign. It would be hard to organize a move like this in just a week. If Phoebe had learned anything from the letters she got from her readers going through a divorce, deciding who got what furniture, knickknacks, and unlikely family heirlooms often took weeks of legal negotiations. Maybe this particular breakdown of a marriage had been in the planning stages for a while.

Much as she hated to admit it, Phoebe hoped that the Jordans had been having issues for a long time and it was only coincidence that they began divorce proceedings this week. That was the kind of problem an advice columnist could address. Other concerns might require a witch with an assist from a Cupid.

Phoebe and Coop waited as a pair of movers carried a love seat down the long wooden staircase. This was another bonus to having magical family members. When Phoebe had moved out of the Manor, her larger items went in the blink of an orb. It saved on moving fees and a fair amount of wear and tear. She felt bad for these movers as they strained to go down the long staircase and hoped that they were being well compensated for their effort.

Once the love seat was clear, Phoebe took Coop by the arm and led him up the path the furniture had just taken down. A woman's voice carried out the open door so that they heard her from halfway down the long staircase. "Unbelievable! I told you I wanted the candlesticks. Why aren't they on the mantle like they've been since we moved into this stupid house at the top of the world?"

Phoebe could feel the hate manifesting from the woman before they even reached the door. She didn't need to rely on her empathic powers to tell her how the screaming woman felt. She could read the mood in her tone. But Phoebe didn't have any choice. She felt something far more intense than simple anger inside the house. As they approached the front door it only intensified.

"This must be the place." Phoebe knocked on the doorframe as she tried to push back the negative feelings that were assaulting her. "Hellllloooo? Anybody home?"

Coop looked at his wife. "Anybody home? Is that even a question with that screaming?"

Phoebe shrugged.

The woman had her back to them as she spoke to the air. She was completely alone in the in the half-empty living room, but Phoebe and Coop could see a Bluetooth device hooked to her ear. "Someone's at the door. I'm going now. But I want those candlesticks back on the mantle by tomorrow

morning!” She pressed a button on the device without saying goodbye and kept the headset in her ear as she spun toward the door. “Who the—Phoebe Halliwell? What are you doing here?”

Phoebe forced a cheery smile as she stepped into the house, taking the less-than-enthusiastic greeting as an invitation. The woman’s rage dissipated the moment she hung up the phone. Now when Phoebe reached out with her empathic abilities she felt nothing. There was no anger or rage. No sadness or happiness either. It was like staring into a void.

“You spoke with one of my coworkers this morning,” Phoebe said, ignoring the sudden lack of emotions for the moment. “She mentioned that you and your husband hit a difficult patch. I was in the neighborhood and I thought maybe it might help to talk.”

The woman looked confused. “What is this? Drive-by couples’ counseling? Who’s the bodyguard?”

Phoebe laughed more than the comments required. “I’m sorry. This is my husband, Coop. He’s… another expert on matters of the heart. We were hoping maybe you and your husband had a few minutes to talk.”

“I have no interest in being part of that follow up article that woman mentioned on the phone.”

“This isn’t for the paper,” Phoebe said. “I take a personal interest in my readers. In certain extreme situations I like to offer my assistance if possible.”

Mrs. Jordan looked around the partially empty living room. “I’d say it’s a little too late for help.”

“In my experience, it’s never too late,” Coop said. “I take it this separation has been in the works for a while now?”

Mrs. Jordan didn’t seem interested in talking about her problems. Phoebe could almost see the internal battle waging in the woman’s mind, but still felt nothing from her emotions. She had to be a big fan of Phoebe’s

column to want to get married in a group photo op in the park. That wasn't something the casual reader would probably want to do. Phoebe had become something of a minor celebrity through that column. Maybe there was a way to work that to her advantage. "Look, Mrs. Jordan—"

"Brianna," she said. "Call me Bri."

Phoebe took the woman's hand hoping to pull a premonition, but she read nothing from that power either. "Bri, I get that this is a little unusual… and certainly unexpected. But you'd really be helping me out. Mika told me that it was my advice that brought you and your husband together in the first place. It would help to understand what led to this decision. It might help me when I respond to future readers."

While Bri considered her answer, the movers came back and started for the couch.

"Hold on a second, fellas," Bri said. "Why don't you move to the dining room for now? Go ahead and take it all. We won't be long."

The movers shrugged and continued into the other room without another word.

Bri motioned to the couch. "I can spare a few minutes, but I don't know that what I have to tell you is going to be all that helpful."

"Any insight into your relationship could go a long way toward helping me diagnose the problem." Phoebe was referring to more than just the Jordans' personal issues as she and Coop sat down on the couch. "I take it that was Mr. Jordan on the phone when we came in? We were hoping to speak with him too."

"Keon's at work right now," Bri said. "I took the day off. Figured it was best to do this when he's not around. We can't really stand the sight of each other these days."

"So this has been building for a while?" Phoebe asked with hope, echoing Coop's earlier question. A long, natural build up to this divorce

would be a welcome response.

Bri shook her head. “That’s the crazy thing. I just woke up one morning and it was like… everything he’d ever done that bothered me suddenly intensified by a million. I couldn’t take it anymore. I mean… I threw a tube of toothpaste at his head because he forgot to put the cap back on. Again.”

“I’m guessing this caught your husband off guard?” Coop asked.

“The toothpaste did,” Bri said with a slight smile. “But he felt it too. It was like after all this time together something just clicked. It happened fast. We went to Vegas last month and had a great time. Even thought about renewing our vows at one of those cheesy Elvis wedding chapels. The photos alone would have been worth it. His mother would have been horrified. Even more scandalized than she was when we told her we’d gotten married by an advice columnist. No offense.”

Phoebe smiled. She liked this woman. “None taken.”

Bri moved over to the mantle. A picture of the couple sat next to an empty spot where those missing candlesticks probably used to be. “I’m glad that we have the memories from that trip to go out on, because the day-to-day stuff just got overwhelming.”

The movers came through the living room with a china cabinet. It provided silent commentary on the conversation as all three heads turned to watch their progress as the men carefully tilted it through the doorway.

“When did it happen?” Phoebe asked once they were gone. “The thing with the toothpaste?”

“Over the weekend,” Bri replied, catching the glance that Phoebe and Coop shared. “You’re wondering about the move?”

“It is kind of fast,” Phoebe said.

“I manage some properties around the city,” Bri explained. “I already had a condo available that I always wanted for myself. Great view of the bay. Close to friends. Not on top of one of the biggest damn hills in the city.

He gets the house and I take everything else. We worked that out before we even filed the paperwork. Except the candlesticks. Those seem to still be under negotiation."

"That's not what I meant," Phoebe said. "What if this is just a phase? Don't you even want to try working it out? I mean, if the separation is already so amicable—"

"Amicable?" Bri said. "You heard us on the phone when you came in, didn't you?"

"I say things in the heat of emotion sometimes," Phoebe replied. "I don't always mean them."

"If you can agree on something as sentimental as your personal belongings, who knows what else you could accept if you talked it out more," Coop added.

Bri placed the picture face-down on the mantle, as if looking at the memory of happier times was causing her pain. And yet, Phoebe didn't feel anything from her. No emotions at all. Bri just faded into the woodwork. "Keon and I are both pretty set in our ways. We know what we want and we make it happen. Neither of us wastes time dithering over decisions. It's what attracted us to one another in the first place. That's why your advice was so valuable."

Phoebe searched her memory, but she had no clue what that advice had been. She must have responded to hundreds readers since Bri had written her letter. She squeezed Coop's hand and flashed him a smile, hoping that he would continue her line of thought.

"What was it Phoebe said that helped you two?" he asked, picking up on his wife's signals.

Bri smiled wistfully as she sat in a metal folding chair across from the couch. "It's funny, actually. It's kind of the reverse of what we're going through now. Keon and I met and fell in love so quickly. He proposed after

the third date. I accepted before he even got the question out." She held up a hand before they could say anything. "Crazy, I know, but like I said, we're decisive people. We knew what we wanted and didn't want to repeat the stupid games we'd been through before with others. It wasn't until our families started hitting us with questions that I had second thoughts. I was questioning my decision, which is not like me. Once my mind is made up, it's usually set."

"That's when you wrote in to Phoebe?" Coop asked.

Bri's wistful smile turned into a resigned laugh. "That wasn't like me either. It was my sister's doing. She knew I read your column and convinced me to write in."

If Phoebe had a dollar for every time one of her readers said something like that, she could have retired early. Everyone freely admitted to enjoying her column, but they were always surprised that they'd ever need her advice personally.

"I figured, why not?" Bri continued. "It was just a quick little email. I never imagined I'd see my problem in the newspaper. But there it was, like a week after I sent it. Your wife actually used you as an example of why I shouldn't second guess myself."

Phoebe squeezed Coop's hand again. This time the message she was hoping to pass along was one that didn't require any action on his part. She remembered Bri's letter now. It was one of the first ones Phoebe had answered after her own wedding. "I told her there was such a thing as love at first sight. That I experienced it with you. I just didn't realize it at the time."

"She wrote about protecting myself by being cautious and not rushing into things," Bri added. "But she also said that when you know, you know. And we knew it was right back then. Just like we know it's over now."

“If I remember correctly,” Phoebe said, “I also suggested you should have a long engagement to make sure that it was a genuine connection. So why not a trial separation? Take the time to be certain that this is what you both want?”

“Phoebe, I appreciate your advice.” Bri got up from her folding chair. “And I’m thrilled that you came in person to talk to me. I really love that you respect your readers like that. But it’s over. There’s nothing more to say.”

Phoebe rose as well and Coop followed suit. “Are you sure I can’t—”

“I’m certain,” Bri said as the movers came back into the house. “We’ve really got a lot to do here before lunch. I’m afraid Keon might swing by to keep an eye on things. Maybe have some second thoughts about letting me take what I want. If you’ll excuse me?”

“Certainly,” Coop said, shaking her hand. “Do you mind if we speak with Keon too?”

Bri shrugged. “You’d be wasting your time, but do what you want. He can talk to whoever he wants. That’s not my problem anymore.”

“Thank you anyway,” Phoebe said, slipping a business card into Bri’s hand. “If you change your mind and want to talk some more, call me. My personal cell phone number is there. I’ll be happy to lend whatever support I can.”

“Sure,” Bri said in a way that implied Phoebe should not expect that call to come anytime soon.

“Just one more thing,” Coop said. “Have you met anyone in the past week that stood out for any particular reason? Had anything unusual happen? I mean, before the toothpaste incident.”

“This isn’t about another person,” Bri said. “No one cheated on anyone.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Coop said. “I just… sometimes changes in life bring about other changes. Seemingly unrelated events can affect you in completely unexpected ways.”

“Yeah, well, nothing new going on here,” Bri said as she walked them to the front door. “Thanks for stopping by.” Phoebe and Coop took their cue and slipped out before the movers blocked their path with the couch.

“That went well,” Phoebe said as she and Coop descended the tall staircase. “Sometimes changes in life bring other changes?”

“Better than asking if she ran into any broken-hearted demons in the past week,” Coop replied. “At least it wasn’t a total waste. I’m leaning toward some kind of supernatural involvement here. They had a romantic weekend a month ago and she never gave us a real reason for them to be breaking up now.”

“Not unless you consider improper toothpaste maintenance a crime,” Phoebe said. “It’s not the first time something like this happened. I get loads of letters from readers who just woke up one day and decided it was over.”

“And were loading a moving van before the week was out?”

Phoebe shrugged. “It’s fast, but it seems like more of a move out of convenience than seething hatred. I’m not entirely convinced yet. Although…” She trailed off.

“Although what?”

Phoebe glanced back to the house. “When we got here, I felt nothing but rage while Bri was screaming at her husband. But the moment she hung up the phone… nothing. No rage. No nothing at all.”

“I didn’t get anything either,” Coop said. “But that’s not unusual. Sometimes people shut down. Do you think the husband will be able to tell us more?”

“Maybe,” Phoebe said. “But I’d rather talk to some other people instead.”

“Next couple on the list?” Coop asked.

“Different list,” Phoebe replied. “Mika spoke with a couple I married that was still blissfully in love. They were thrilled to be a part of the follow up article she was planning. After that disappointment it will be nice to meet with one of my success stories. Can you beam us over to the East Bay?”

Coop held out a hand. “Your wish is my command.”

Phoebe took her husband’s hand as they both checked around to make sure they were alone. The street wasn’t crowded, but it was busy enough that two people suddenly disappearing in a pink glow would not go unnoticed.

Phoebe looked back at the house to see that the movers were struggling with getting the couch through the front door. Their attention was completely taken by their efforts. “Moving van?” she suggested.

“Moving van,” Coop agreed as he led her up the ramp and into the back of the truck. Once they were blocked from view, Phoebe provided the address of their destination and they zipped across the bay, materializing on a tree-lined street in Berkeley that was far less hilly than the place they had just left.

The houses in this neighborhood had fenced-in green yards and every other one had some kind of play set in it. This was the type of neighborhood Phoebe could imagine raising the girls in one day. Their current place was fine, but she could see them growing out of it as P.J. and Parker got older and any other little ones came along. She’d have to check into the school district in the area first, though. It wasn’t a given that she was going to send the kids to Magic School.

Educational opportunities aside, Phoebe could see herself in a quiet neighborhood like this. She breathed in the fresh air as a loud crash broke through the stillness. Phoebe looked at Coop. “That’s not good.”

The pair walked across the yard and up onto the small porch. The front window was open, allowing them unobstructed access to the argument going on inside. Like last time, Phoebe felt overwhelming rage the closer they got to the house. But this was so much more than she'd felt with Bri.

"I can't believe I married you! I can't believe I wasted all this time with you! I can't believe—"

"That you never shut up?!"

"Blissfully in love?" Coop asked as the yells got louder.

Phoebe couldn't manage a response. She was concentrating too much on trying to keep out the hate. It was overwhelming her.

"I want a divorce!"

Bright lights flashed in Phoebe's eyes as she reached for the door. The wave of unrepressed emotions hit her hard, and she lost her balance and crumpled to the ground as everything went black.

CHAPTER 6

Medusa stretched her arms above her head, working out the kinks in her newly reconstituted joints. It felt good to be on her feet again, breathing the musty air of the strange cave she was in. There was a little crick in her neck, but otherwise she felt fine. She was whole again. *Alive!*

She never imagined it would be possible. Hades was too powerful for her magic to fight against. Her sisters were even weaker. How they managed to bring her back, just the two of them on their own, was a mystery they would need to explain. But that would come later. For now, there were more pressing questions to answer.

Medusa ran a hand through her hair. *Damn that Athena.* The snakes were still there. It wasn't a surprise considering that her sisters were still in their monstrous forms—staring at her, waiting for her to speak—but she had hoped after all this time…

But how much time? How long had she been gone?

Death had been a nothingness she'd never imagined. She'd expected a journey to Hades, to be ferried along the River Styx and tortured along with the other pitiful souls that had reached the end of their lives. But there was none of that when Perseus killed her. She simply ceased to exist. Lost in a void with darkness all around until she woke to the dim light of lanterns in some unfamiliar cave.

Had she been gone for weeks? Years?

Is Perseus still playing the hero, killing innocents like herself?

Her sisters were watching: Euryale with her usual concern, like Medusa was a tiny bird with a broken wing; Stheno still barely containing her anger, ready to lash out at the world. Even though it felt like she had only seen them minutes ago, Medusa knew that a great deal of time had passed. She felt her sisters' aching for her in their souls. Their pain had built into a power of its own, one that had grown and changed with time. It emanated from them in waves. Just how long *had* she been gone?

"When?" she managed to eek out. It was difficult to form the word on her tongue. Her body was adjusting to her return, rebuilding from whatever decay she had become. Had there still been flesh to repair? Bone? Had she completely faded to dust?

Euryale replied in a language Medusa did not recognize with words she could not understand. She must have looked perplexed, because her sister stopped mid-sentence. "It's… been a while," Euryale said in their native tongue.

"Can you shift?" Stheno asked. "Reclaim your glamour?"

Medusa smiled. This was Stheno. No time for reunions. Get right to the point. "I'll… try."

Medusa closed her eyes and concentrated. She remembered her body from the time before Athena had cursed her; the face that Poseidon had once claimed that he loved. The declaration might have been a lie, but the face had been true. It had been *her*.

She could feel the shift occur. The snakes on her head went silent as they transformed into coiling black locks, the horror of her scaly skin turned to flesh, and the fangs drew back into more manageable teeth. She ran her human tongue over them inside her mouth and smiled. This body was far more pleasant. It was her true self.

"Better?" she asked, her voice growing stronger.

“Much,” Euryale said jumping toward her and pulling her sister into a hug. The snakes in Euryale’s own hair hissed in their ears. Even in her monstrous form, it was nice to be in the loving arms of her sister once again. Medusa enjoyed the embrace, even though it came from Euryale’s scaly skin.

“But not entirely,” Stheno added, leaning closer to Medusa once Euryale let her go. At first, Medusa thought she was coming in for a hug as well, but Stheno’s arms remained at her side. Her gaze was focused on Medusa’s face.

“Your eyes,” Stheno said. “They haven’t changed. They are inhuman.”

Medusa didn’t need a reflection to show her how they looked. She was all too familiar with the serpents’ eyes that she’d been cursed to carry.

“Let me try again.” Medusa closed her eyes and concentrated harder. She remembered the blue of the eyes that Poseidon once compared to the seas that he ruled. The memory brought her pain, but it also helped focus her concentration. Emotion fueled her powers and she could use that energy to create the change. She opened her eyes again to see Stheno was still inches from her. “Better?”

Stheno’s face showed her disappointment.

“No matter,” Euryale said. “We can work with that.”

Medusa tilted her head, enjoying the feel of her hair against her shoulder. “How?”

“Sunglasses, of course.” She nodded to the tunic Medusa wore. It was a recreation of the outfit she’d worn on the day Perseus had taken her life. “Fashions have changed over time.”

Stheno and Euryale exchanged a look before they brought up their familiar glamours as well, returning to the bodies that Medusa had known them in from the time of her birth. These were the sisters Medusa remembered. Euryale with long, straight hair that she was forever fussing

with along with a casual, relaxed pose so different from Stheno with her nearly Amazonian stature and perfect poise.

The clothes they wore were different to say the least. Stheno looked conservative in a jacket that seemed to be made from the skin of some animal and that covered her arms entirely. Euryale wore sandals that resembled more of a torture device, elevating her heel at an unnatural angle.

“How long have I been gone?” Medusa asked again, regarding the odd vestments her sisters wore.

Stheno reached out and took Euryale’s hand and they both reached out to Medusa. “Let us show you.”

Medusa took their hands, forming a circle. Once complete, Medusa’s mind was flooded with images of the life she had missed. The *lives* she had missed. She had been dead far longer than days or weeks. She had been gone for more than years or decades or even centuries.

Millennia had passed since Perseus took her life. Since Athena had cursed her. Since Poseidon had…

The world was a different place, a *horrible* place. It was full of anger and hatred. Great wars raged on filled with death. Powerful men controlled everything, through every century that she saw. Medusa understood that the images she witnessed were being filtered through her sisters’ eyes. That Stheno and Euryale were feeding her what they wanted her to see. But all of it was real. Everything they showed her had happened while she had slept. By the end, she began to wonder why they would ever wake her to live again in this world that was as monstrous as their cursed forms.

Medusa released her sister’s hands. It was far too much to comprehend at once. She’d been shown so many images without any real context. No explanation. It would take time to understand it all, to bring order to the chaos and fully comprehend the thousands of years of history that she had missed.

Until then, she focused on what she could manage. She closed her eyes again and picked out an image that had come from Euryale's mind. It was a more modern fashion choice that would allow her to blend in with the current populace.

When she opened her eyes again she saw that her tunic had morphed into something she never could have imagined wearing in the time before her death. Cloth wrapped around both her legs. It was tight and constricting. Her top was much the same. Her feet were in an unnatural position, like Euryale's, putting almost all her weight on her toes while she struggled to maintain her balance. This would not do.

She closed her eyes again and pulled another image from the memories her sisters had implanted: sandals like the ones she wore on her trips to the market; the cloth still wrapping both her legs, but now a lighter material with more room to breathe. She kept the shirt that was tight and clingy. It felt nice against her skin. It looked good on her once she opened her eyes again. She would need a mirror to get the full effect, but for the moment it worked.

"Is this better?" she asked in the language her sister spoke earlier. She knew it to be English now, words from a new world for a new millennium.

"Perfect," Stheno said. "Come. We have much to do."

CHAPTER 7

Piper watched in satisfaction as the congressman broke into tiny orbs and disappeared. It wasn't so much that she was pleased at another job well done by the Charmed Ones as she was glad to be rid of the annoying politician. She'd have to remember to make a note at the restaurant that if anyone ever took a call from Congressman Ward's office about a reservation that Halliwell's would be full up that night. She didn't want to see any pictures on social media of that jackass in her dining room.

"Let's hope that amnesia spell holds," Prue said as the last of the orbs disappeared, leaving the three of them alone now that Leo and Cole were off on their next magical errand. "The last thing we need is a congressman finding out that witches are real."

"It's not like the government doesn't already know about us," Piper said.

Prue shot her a questioning look.

"Long story," Piper replied with a terse smile. Their brief flirtation with working for Homeland Security wasn't exactly the highlight of their careers as the Charmed Ones. She really didn't feel like getting into it now.

"Part of me is going to miss him," Prue said. "It was nice having a small-minded idiot to argue with for a while. Really got the blood pumping."

"You must be incredibly bored," Paige replied.

"I'm kidding. Sort of. But since Dad went back home things have been kind of quiet around here. Still, quiet is better than the idiotic ramblings of a

politician.” Prue waved a hand over the table, making the pizza box and the dirty dishes disappear. Not for the first time, Piper was envious of one of her sisters’ powers. That ability would come in handy with three kids in the house. She wasn’t willing to put up with the trade-off of being trapped on the Nexus though.

“We’ll find a way to get you out of here,” Piper said.

“Maybe Grams knows something,” Paige suggested. “Or Mom.”

“They’ve been very quiet lately,” Prue said. “I’m not sure if that’s by choice or the Elders are keeping them on lockdown.”

Piper knew their Grams could be challenging at times. She was pretty steadfast in her beliefs. But she’d never ignore one of her girls when she was in need of some of Grams’s particular brand of blunt comfort. “Why would they—”

“Because I broke the rules,” Prue said with a resigned shrug. “I tried to force myself back to life. I took off with a body that wasn’t mine. How long does the list go on?”

“That body was in a vegetative state,” Piper reminded her. “There was no hope for her. I looked into it.”

“You did?”

“I wanted to make sure her family wasn’t going to be coming after us,” Piper said with her own shrug. If a member of the Halliwell family suddenly disappeared she would have blown up every demon between here and the Underworld to get them back. Conscious or not. It was only logical to expect the family of the witch whose body Prue possessed might want to do the same. If there was, in fact, any family to find.

Prue didn’t seem to like Piper’s reasoning as the expression on her face revealed her thoughts. “You thought I didn’t check these things out? What? Did you assume I just jumped into the body of the first random woman I came across?”

“No,” Piper said, surprised by the venom in her sister’s tone. “Of course not. But I didn’t think it would hurt to do some follow-ups. We are messing with some pretty big forces here.”

“Really?” Prue said. “Please tell me more about how big these forces are? You’ve been doing this so much longer than me after all.”

“Hey!” Paige stepped between them. “We have enough enemies out there. We don’t need to be fighting in here too.”

Prue took a deep breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I just… I’ve been on my own so long I forgot what it was like to be part of a team again.”

“I’m sorry too,” Piper said. She didn’t understand why she was getting angry with Prue. None of this was her fault. Well, some of it was her doing, but ultimately she was just trying to get her life back. Piper couldn’t blame her for that. She’d never been dead before. Well, not *permanently*. “I shouldn’t have been looking into things behind your back. I don’t know why I didn’t mention it earlier.”

Prue let out a mirthless laugh. “It’s not a surprise. We’ve all been tiptoeing around what I did. Obviously taking over another person’s body wasn’t my shiniest hour. I mean, talk about personal gain! I do deserve some kind of punishment for forcing myself into the world again when I was warned against it. I’d just like the chance to go out and see that world from time to time. Maybe have some out privileges or whatever they call it when you’re on house arrest.”

“At least we can visit,” Paige said.

Prue wrapped her arms around her sisters, pulling them into a hug. “And that makes everything worth it.”

As the trio embraced, a familiar pink glow filled the couch as Coop and Phoebe returned. Piper was the first to break free of the trio when she realized something was wrong. Phoebe was on the couch, eyes closed, completely unconscious. “What happened?”

Coop looked up at her with fear in his eyes. “I don’t know. We were visiting one of the couples on her list and she just collapsed. Paige, can you…?”

“On it.” Paige knelt over Phoebe’s body and reached out with her healing power. There was no visible wound so she held her hands out over Phoebe’s head and slowly moved down her sister’s body until the power connected with the problem. Paige’s hands began to glow when they hovered over Phoebe’s heart. It didn’t seem to be a physical issue with the organ that pumped blood to the body. It was more a metaphysical one with the center of emotion in the human soul.

Paige did what she could to draw out the poison that seemed to be affecting her sister, but she wasn’t sure that she was doing any good. Whitelighter magic might not be useful against this sort of spell.

Once again, Piper was jealous of a sister’s powers. This too would come in handy with three danger-prone children who bore the many scrapes and cuts of a traditional childhood, plus the bonus magical damage they could inflict on themselves. Phoebe’s empathy would come in handy when they reached the teen years, now that she thought of it too. Their family was really more powerful working together as a single unit than they were in their individual lives, though they were pretty kickass individuals as well.

Phoebe’s eye shot open and she took in a couple of deep, heaving breaths before Paige could even bring her magical glow to full strength. Piper quickly squeezed in by the side of the couch. “Phoebe? Are you okay?”

“Getting there,” Phoebe said as she tried to sit up. “What happened?”

Piper placed a hand on Phoebe’s shoulder. “You should stay down for a minute.”

“I don’t have a minute.” Phoebe pushed her sister’s hand away as she shakily got to her feet.

Coop was beside her in a second, supporting his wife, who was more unsteady than usual. “We do have a minute. We have more than a minute.”

“No,” she insisted. “Someone… some*thing* is attacking the couples I brought together. We have to do something about this.”

“How about you start by filling us in on what’s going on?” Prue said.

“If Phoebe sits back down, I will bring you up to speed,” Coop said as all eyes fell on his wife.

“Okay, fine!” she said as she dropped back on the couch, nearly missing the edge and slipping onto the floor. “I’m just going to close my eyes for a second while I get my bearings.”

“Good idea,” Coop said with his eyes full of concern. He brushed a stray hair from Phoebe’s face as she smiled up at him. Part of her seemed annoyed to be sidelined at the moment, while another part of her was obviously happy to have someone to rely on to take over while she caught her breath.

Once Coop was satisfied that his wife was not about to fall off the couch, he filled her sisters in on what they had learned since they left earlier. He regaled them with the story of the Jordans’ sudden breakup and what was supposed to be a visit to a happier couple. He didn’t have many details, but at least now it seemed pretty certain that some kind of magic was at play. Phoebe’s extreme reaction to the anger coming from that last couple seemed to be fairly definitive proof that something wicked had definitely this way come.

“But you didn’t see anything?” Piper asked. “No one using any kind of magic on Phoebe directly?”

“Nothing that resembled any kind of attack,” Coop said. “It seemed more like a reaction to the emotions coming from the couple. The closer we got to them, the weaker Phoebe was, until it all overwhelmed her.”

“What about you?” Paige asked. “Cupids are empathic too, aren’t they? I thought that was a pretty big part of the gig.”

“I certainly felt it,” Coop replied. “I probably would have felt it if I didn’t have any sensitivity to that kind of thing. The rage was emanating from them. We didn’t even need to be in the same room to be hit by it.”

“But it didn’t overwhelm you like it did Phoebe?” Paige clarified.

“Well, look at him,” Phoebe said as she got to her feet again, Coop quickly reaching out to grab her. “He’s more than twice my size. An emotional ox couldn’t take him down.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Prue said.

“I don’t think it matters.” Coop held tight to his wife, providing support although she seemed much more steady on her feet this time. “And I don’t think that’s the reason you were overwhelmed.”

“You’ve been in this game longer than me,” Phoebe said with a wave. “Do tell.”

“You have a personal connection with these couples,” Coop said. “You’re the reason they’re together. Even more than that, you’re the one who bonded them in marriage. Someone seems to be working to undo these couplings. A side effect of that must have weakened your magic.”

“But who?” Piper asked. “Why?”

“We’ve got a book full of possible subjects at home,” Phoebe said. “Take your pick. Or it could be some new enemy. My one question is does it have anything to do with this congressman turning to stone?” She looked around the living room. “My other question is what did you do with Cole?”

“He’s with Leo,” Piper said. “They’re contacting the magical community. We figured if more people are turned to stone it will help to have a fairy, a leprechaun, and a dwarf on call.”

“I still don’t know why,” Prue said. “The Power of Three spell worked fine with my boost from the Nexus.”

Phoebe looked to Piper before speaking. “Yeah. I don’t know that we should do that again. It wasn’t all that fun.”

It confirmed what Piper had been thinking. Something wasn’t right with their powers when Prue brought the Nexus into the mix. She wasn’t the only one who had felt it. And maybe she was still feeling it. There was something more to the little argument that she’d had with Prue earlier. Something not entirely natural.

“And the congressman?” Phoebe asked.

“Back to his important work setting the country back a few decades,” Paige said. “Another success in the work of the Charmed Ones.”

“Okay then.” Phoebe took her husband’s hand. “You focus on your problem and we’ll deal with mine. I need to get back to work and check the files on all the couples I married that day in the park. There’s one couple in particular that I’m worried about.”

Coop looked concerned. “Phoebe, if you’re going to be affected by—”

“These people are my responsibility. I have to help them.”

“Your sisters could probably use some help too,” Coop reminded her.

“We’re okay for now,” Prue said, more to Coop than anyone else. “We can stand to split up our resources. We’ll call you if we need you.”

“I’m going to go see if the Book of Shadows has any suggestions,” Piper said, trying to move the conversation forward. “Maybe come up with some suspects of our own before someone else is turned to stone.”

“I’ll check in with Henry,” Paige said. “See if any other mysterious statues have been reported to the police.”

“And I’ll go back to work on my puzzle.” Prue leaned over the table. “I’ve almost got the entire sky complete.”

Piper shot her sister a look. “Prue.”

“Just kidding,” Prue said. “I’ll consult the library here. There’s got to be something in one of the books this place conjured up. Turning people to

stone is pretty basic magic. It happens enough in mythology, fairy tales, and our own personal history that we probably have any number of possibilities to choose from. You focus on your thing. We've got this."

Phoebe looked up at her husband and squeezed his hand. "Sounds like everyone's got their marching orders. To the *Bay Mirror*, if you please."

Coop shook his head, but beamed them out of Prue's home without another word.

"We'll be back soon," Piper said as she took Paige's arm and they orbed back to the Manor.

Piper went straight for the Book of Shadows as they arrived in the attic. By now she had the book pretty much memorized, but new entries still popped up occasionally, which made it worth browsing whenever a magical issue came up. She began with the Titans, just to see if there was anything they might have missed. Greek mythology was rife with people being turned to stone. It was as good a place as any to start.

As she reached the page on the Titans, she realized that Paige was still in the attic, standing at the door that opened the portal to Magic School.

"We can get Leo on research in the school library when he returns," Piper said. "You should go see Henry."

"That's not it," Paige said. "I was thinking, I can't just keep orbing everyone across the globe when they feel like visiting Prue. Maybe there's a way to make a portal to the Nexus. She could use the company."

Piper joined her sister at the door. "That would be great. Do you think we can do it?"

"Beats me," Paige said. "I'm still not sure what that Nexus can or can't control."

"None of us are," Piper agreed with a shiver.

"And that's what I'm worried about," Paige said.

"You felt it too?" Piper tentatively asked. "Something is… off there?"

“The whole place is off if you ask me,” Paige said. “But yeah. I felt something weird when Prue tried to boost our power with the Nexus. It wasn’t the first time I felt weird while we used our magic there.”

“Glad to know it’s not just me,” Piper replied. “But maybe it’s just because we’re not used to it yet. If we can get some kind of portal going there, it might make us all more comfortable with the place.”

“It’s worth a try,” Paige said. “Anything that will make life easier would be good. I’ll check in with Henry and then we can try some experiments.”

“That should be fun,” Piper said dryly.

Paige smiled. “I know. What could possibly go wrong?”

CHAPTER 8

Coop and Phoebe beamed into her office at the newspaper, making sure that they stayed away from the windows when they appeared. It was as discreet an entrance as two people accompanied by a bright pink glow could make and one they got away with far more often than they should have. Most of the reporters in the bullpen were usually too busy to notice that Phoebe hadn't passed through on her way to her desk. Who knew what they thought of the light that came through her windows? Or if they even noticed it at all.

"I'll go check in at work," Coop said as he leaned in for a kiss. "See if they know anything."

Phoebe's lips met his and lingered a bit longer than might have been appropriate for a workplace. Thankfully, she had her own private office. Then again, a little PDA from the resident love expert wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

"What was that for?" Coop asked as they broke apart. "Not that I'm complaining."

Phoebe smiled. "I'm just… I feel lucky we found each other. This magical life isn't easy. I don't want to take any of it for granted."

"I love you, too," Coop said.

Phoebe played with the pile of letters on her desk to avoid looking her husband in the eyes. "I'm actually surprised you're letting me continue to investigate considering what happened earlier."

"I may have planted a tracking device somewhere on your body." Coop pulled her into another kiss.

“I suspect we’ll have fun searching for it later,” Phoebe said as she pulled away again, swatting him playfully on the arm. “But you can’t distract me from my mission. Now go. Find out what you can. We’ll regroup later.”

“I live to serve.” Coop bowed as he beamed away.

Phoebe tensed as he disappeared, glad that he was gone and wouldn’t notice. It was weird that Coop had said the same thing that Cole had said earlier. Sure, it was a common phrase, but the two men couldn’t have been more different. She shrugged it off as an odd coincidence, smiling down at the photo of him and the girls she kept her desk.

She really was luckier than most people. Not just because she’d found love with a Cupid, although, seriously, she couldn’t have asked for a better partner in life. Phoebe’s dating history might have had numerous false starts, but each guy in her life had helped her grow in some special way. Even the evil ones. If she hadn’t gone through the highs and lows with Cole, she never would have been ready to accept Coop’s love.

Maybe there was such a thing as having more than one soul mate. It was something worth considering since it seemed that her past and her future were going to be sharing parts of her life now. But that was an issue for another time. She had other soul mates to protect today. No more relationships were going to fall apart on her watch.

Phoebe blew a kiss to the framed family portrait as she sat behind her desk and brought up the archived files on her computer. Mika had pulled together information on all the couples that came for the mass wedding photo op back when the event had happened. The archives held far more than the addresses she’d texted earlier.

Elise had devoted the full Sunday supplement to the mass wedding, including a photo spread, interviews with the couples, and tips from Phoebe for making a lasting marriage. She’d never been particularly comfortable

with that last bit, considering she was still a relative newlywed at the time she'd written it. Mostly, she'd looked to Piper and Leo's marriage for her advice. If those two could survive the amount of turmoil they'd been through, anyone could.

The supplement also included the original letters that Phoebe had answered for the couples that had decided to be part of the photo op. She wanted to go over everything she had about these people to see if there was anything in their history that linked them together before their mass wedding. Maybe whatever evil force was at work here was playing a long game from the start. The odds were slim, but she didn't have any better ideas to go on. At the very least, she'd be better prepared to talk to the other couples than she had been earlier with Bri.

As Phoebe skimmed through the files, she wondered about one couple in particular that would not be in the archives. One of the pairs of newlyweds she had married hadn't come because of her work on the paper. They had been more interested in her other job. It was the one human interest story she never could give to Elise, even once her boss knew about her connection to the magical realm. That mass wedding in the park had also united the original spirits of the most famous couple of all time: Romeo and Juliet.

Through a weird combination of magic and creative writing, William Shakespeare had doomed the spirits of the characters to a tragic romance for the ages. It wasn't something that was just played out by actors on stages and movie screens. These two souls had taken on lives of their own. Several centuries' worth of lives to be precise.

Phoebe had undone the spell by presiding over their wedding so Romeo and Juliet could live happily ever after. Afterwards, they went off on their merry little way. Didn't even bother to send a postcard from their honeymoon. Phoebe worried that if something had happened to reverse

their curse, it might have had an effect on the other couples that had been part of the ceremony. It was the most logical explanation for an incredibly illogical situation.

With neither Romeo nor Juliet in the archives, Phoebe had no way to contact the couple to see if they had anything to do with it. She was hoping that Coop might have better luck on his end, while she focused on the mortal element of the proceedings.

Several couples were still blissfully in love—or at least hadn't started divorce proceedings—but Phoebe didn't know where to begin with them. If someone or some*thing* was behind this, those couples would need to be protected. Things were moving fast, if this morning's couple was any indication. Phoebe and Coop hadn't even had time to speak with them before she was overwhelmed.

Maybe it was time to call in reinforcements. The bonus of having such a large family was that they had many resources at their disposal. Too bad her sisters were focused on another issue at the moment.

"We've got a problem," Mika said as she barreled into Phoebe's office carrying her laptop.

Phoebe didn't look up. "I know. You were right about the couples from the photo op. I'm on it. How many times do we have to have this conversation?"

Mika put the laptop down on the desk and opened it, turning the screen toward Phoebe. "That's not the problem. Well it is. But it just got bigger."

Phoebe didn't need to ask what the publicist was talking about. It was right there in big, bold letters: BAY MIRROR'S LOVE GURU KILLS THE LOVE SHE CREATES.

"Well that's just rude," Phoebe said. It also showed a stunning lack of creativity. She could come up with a half dozen quality puns on her own just sitting there staring at the headline.

“Phoebe! This is serious!” Mika said. “You didn’t listen to me this morning. Hear me now.”

“Isn’t this that website that’s always trashing the *Mirror* because the blogger guy that runs it insists that print media is dead?”

“It might get picked up by legitimate news sources,” Mika said.

Phoebe chuckled. “Anyone that picks up this story will not be a legitimate news source.”

“Phoebe, you care about your readers, right?”

“I do.”

“This article is making them into the punch line of a joke,” Mika said. “It’s using them to make *you* the joke. Are you going to stop it or what?”

“I’m working on stopping it,” Phoebe assured her. “I just have to figure out how.”

“I know how.”

Phoebe waited for Mika to fill in the blanks. The fact that Mika was being so slow to finish her thought raised Phoebe’s suspicions. She was not going to like whatever the publicist was about to suggest.

“An interview,” Mika said.

“With the couples?” Phoebe asked. “You said that earlier. I don’t want to exploit them while they’re going through serious issues.”

“Not with the couples,” Mika said. “With you.”

“I don’t see what an interview in *The Bay Mirror* will do for me that I can’t do on my own with my column.”

“Not with the paper,” Mika said. “With the blogger.”

“No.”

“Phoebe.”

“No!” Phoebe insisted. “I am not going to legitimize this guy’s story by responding to it. I’m going to figure out what’s going on with these couples

and I’m going to fix it. That’s what I do. It’s what I’m good at. So, Mika, if you don’t mind, I’ve got to get to work.”

Phoebe grabbed her bag and stood to emphasize her commitment to finding some answers. The archives had told her everything they could about the couples, which wasn’t much at all. She didn’t know where she was going as she brushed past Mika and left her office, but there weren’t any answers for her at the paper. Since Coop was off at Cupid headquarters, it was time for Phoebe to consult her own supernatural resources as well.

CHAPTER 9

"…Around the world, but please don't hex us. Connect this portal with the Nexus." Paige grabbed the handle of the magical door in the attic and concentrated on her destination. Usually when she opened it the endless main hall of Magic School greeted her. This time she wished for something a little different. She was almost afraid to open the door for fear of what could be on the other side. The Nexus of the All was some serious magic.

"How is it we've been coming up with these spells all these years and we still haven't gotten any better with our rhymes?" Piper asked from her perch behind the Book of Shadows.

"The demons that make up our usual audience aren't very discerning. And they're usually dead by the time we get to the end." Paige held her breath and yanked open the door hoping to find Prue on the other side, but only seeing darkness.

"Did it work?" Piper asked as she came over to join her sister.

"Can't tell." Paige leaned as close to the portal as she felt comfortable doing until she knew what waited on the other side. It wasn't total blackness in there, but it was very hard to see. One thing was certain: it wasn't Prue's castle.

"Careful," Piper warned.

Paige pulled her phone out of her pocket and turned on the flashlight app, shining it into the portal. The darkness gave way to a familiar image. It was the basement of the Manor. "Guess I should have specified which Nexus."

“Close the door,” Piper said. “We haven’t cleaned down there in forever. I don’t want to look at that mess.”

Paige did as instructed. She was frustrated but not surprised that she wasn’t having any luck. She’d been working on the portal since she had gotten back from visiting Henry. He hadn’t heard about any other statues suddenly turning up around town, but he promised to check with his usual connections.

The good thing about her husband being a parole officer was that she not only had his police contacts at her disposal, but his former criminal ones as well. Henry’s parolees were fairly tuned in to the word on the street and had proven useful resources in the past. Not that she expected them to be of much value with their current magical issue, but she never knew where help would come from.

“Give it a rest for today,” Piper said as she returned to the Book. “We need to figure out who turned the congressman to stone before it happens to someone else.”

Paige closed the door. “That’s going to be a little difficult since we have absolutely nothing to work with so far.”

“And yet, I’ve already got a partial list of suspects.” Piper held up the notepad she’d been jotting information down on while Paige worked. The page was filled with more cross-outs than words, but it was a starting point.

As Paige joined her sister by the Book of Shadows, Cole and Leo materialized in front of them. “Success,” Leo said. “We dropped off a fairy, dwarf, and leprechaun with Prue.”

“That’s a pretty loose definition of success,” Paige replied. “And it sounds like the beginning of a very bad joke.”

“Leprechauns can be kind of annoying,” Cole said. “I never really dealt with them much before.”

“Consider yourself lucky,” Paige said. “No pun intended.”

“Thanks, honey,” Piper gave her husband a hug. “But somehow I doubt that’s the kind of company Prue was hoping for.”

“They’re working on combining their magic into an all-purpose potion,” Leo explained. “Then she can send them home. How’s the research going?”

Piper held up her scratch pad as example. “Could use a little help. Think you can swing over to Magic School?”

“Consider it done,” Leo said as he made his way to the portal.

“Leo, wait!” Paige called out as he opened the door and stepped into the darkness, resulting in a loud crashing sound that caused everyone in the attic to cringe and Cole to look confused.

“Umm…” Leo’s voice came out of the darkness. “Why am I in the basement?”

“What is this joyousness on my tongue?” Medusa asked as she enjoyed the sharp and sweet flavors blending in her mouth. She and her sisters sat around a small metal table outside a shop on a busy thoroughfare. The people passing by were dressed in all manner of strange outfits. Some wore conservative clothing that covered their entire bodies, while others were in garish fabrics that barely covered parts of the body best left to the imagination.

“It’s peanut butter and chocolate!” Euryale held out a small plastic tub filled with a golden liquid. “Here! Dip it in caramel. That makes it even better!”

Medusa did as her sister instructed and popped what was left of the small cup of chocolate in her mouth. “Thank you,” she said as she chewed. Euryale was right. It was a taste combination unlike any she had experienced before.

Medusa had learned of chocolate when she shared in her sisters’ visions of the eras she’d missed while during her deep slumber of death. She knew

much about this modern world now, things that she had never dreamed before. But understanding the concept of chocolate and eating it were two entirely different experiences.

“If you like sweets we’ll have to get you one of those ice blended coffees later. They’re like ice cream with a jolt of caffeine!” Euryale said.

“Ice cream? Caffeine?” Medusa searched her new memories until she located images that matched the words. Neither item looked particularly interesting to her in her mind’s eye, but she trusted that Euryale knew of what she spoke. She had been right so far with the candy she’d insisted Medusa try as soon as they materialized in this amazing city so far away from their homeland of Greece.

“There will be time to experience all kinds of new sensations,” Stheno assured her. “For now I’d like to begin work on our plan of revenge.”

“On Perseus and Athena?” Medusa perked up at the thought. She would love to make her tormentors pay for their misdeeds. Turning them to stone wasn’t even the beginning of what she dreamed to do with them.

“Lost to the obscurity of history,” Stheno assured her. “They can’t harm you any longer.”

“Poseidon too?” Medusa asked. She hated him most of all, and yet part of her still felt the sting of conflicting emotions for the god she’d once loved and who had violated her in the most horrific way.

“Poseidon too,” Euryale replied.

The sense of relief was a weight off Medusa that outweighed any other emotion. It cleared her mind to realize that she had survived them all. She had nothing more to fear. “Then I have no need for revenge. I have returned to my life. A new life. A *better* life. I get to experience all of these exciting times while they are long gone. That is the best vengeance I can imagine.”

Stheno took her sister’s hand across the small table. “Oh, but there are so many more opportunities in this future time. Chances for us to protect

the innocent, those who were betrayed like yourself. To punish those who would do others harm."

"Is that why we're here?" Medusa asked as she allowed Stheno to gently pull her up from her seat so they could stroll along the busy streets of this metropolis. "What did you call this place?"

Euryale followed, throwing their trash in a round metal receptacle outside the establishment where they had purchased the joyous chocolate. "San Francisco! A city named for a holy man. In a land we never dreamed existed during our earliest days on the planet."

San Francisco. It was such a strange place with modern conveniences the likes of which Medusa had never even imagined. She was having trouble taking it all in. Chocolate and peanut butter were only two of the amazing things she had experienced since they appeared.

Mechanical vehicles of various sizes and colors clogged the streets around them with bells and horns and roaring noises unlike any she had ever heard before. People pushed past her on the sidewalks staring at small devices in their hands as they walked, barely raising their eyes to see what was in front of them. Some were having one-sided conversations with unseen companions, often with odd buttons clipped into their ears.

The buildings around her were larger than any temples she had ever visited during her previous life. Even that monstrosity of the Parthenon could not match them in size or grandeur. She enjoyed the fact that these towering structures were so much more impressive than the Temple of Athena. It was just one more way that she felt she had won out over that shrew of a goddess.

"You are partially correct," Stheno said. "We have come to San Francisco to seek vengeance on the oppressors. But that is an evil that happens the world over. No, we have come here specifically because this is the home of the Charmed Ones."

Medusa perked up at the title. “Charmed Ones?”

“Protectors of the innocent, like us,” Stheno said. “Very powerful witches. We tapped into their powers to bring you to life. Until you are back at full strength we will be at our strongest in the city that is their base of operations. But I see no reason for that to stop our plan. We’ve already put it in motion.”

Medusa adjusted the dark glasses that covered her cursed eyes. They were uncomfortable and it was taking far too long for her to become accustomed to them. But that was nothing compared to the discomfort Medusa felt about the plan that Stheno spoke of. “Can’t vengeance wait? I’d like the chance to experience this modern world first. At least have some more chocolate.”

Stheno wrapped an arm around her sister’s shoulder. “Yes, sister dear. Vengeance can wait, but the women of this period cannot. Oppression still rages on. You saw it in the images we shared with you. Things have gotten better since our time. *Far* better. But not good enough. Women continue to be treated as an inferior class. Witches are still forced into hiding. We waited thousands of years until the magic would allow us to reunite. I do not want to waste another moment.”

Medusa sighed. Stheno had not softened in all that time. She was still as bull-headed as Taurus and just as dangerous. But she had managed the impossible and returned Medusa to the living. For that, she would always be grateful. She would also feel indebted to her big sister. Medusa adjusted her glasses again. “Tell me about this man you spoke of earlier.”

Stheno smiled. Her demeanor immediately shifted. This was the playful girl Medusa remembered from their childhood. It was a shame the joyousness came from such a dark place.

“He owns that massive tower across the street,” Stheno said with a nod toward the hulking glass and steel structure. “Along with a quarter of the

city. He is singularly responsible for many of the jobs in San Francisco and around the world."

"An estate owner?" Medusa asked.

"He does own a lot of property," Euryale noted. "But that's not his primary source of income. They call him a media mogul. He oversees a vast empire that provides news and entertainment to the masses."

"And this is bad for women?" Medusa asked. "It's bad for witches?"

"His entertainment programming routinely degrades women," Stheno explained. "His news focuses on stories that hold us back. Make us look lesser to men. But it is worse within his organization for the people working for him. No woman holds an executive position in his company. Even in the highest roles, they are paid less than their male counterparts. His treatment of any minority in his organization is archaic by today's standards."

"And for this he deserves to be punished?" Medusa asked.

"For this he deserves to be made an example of," Stheno said. "We need to make a statement. We are the stronger sex in this time. We have the power to lead. And it is time that we showed it."

Medusa wanted to argue the point, but she had seen what Stheno spoke of herself. It was in the images her sisters had implanted in her head when they provided a history of the world in the time that she has been gone. Yes, civilizations had advanced in many wonderful ways in that time. Things were so much better than they had been in her day. But even with that evolution, the small-minded still existed. If she could contribute to protecting even one person from the hell she had experienced in her first life, then Stheno was right. They had to do something.

"Come," Stheno said as they crossed the street. "The oppressor awaits."

CHAPTER 10

“There.” Stheno pointed to a man exiting the glass tower testament of his insecurity. “Vaughn Ramsey. Vainglorious ruler of a media empire and cruel oppressor of women.”

Euryale pressed her palm to her forehead and sighed. “You’d think after all this time on this planet, she’d be more down with modern colloquialisms.”

Medusa wasn’t entirely sure what either of her sisters was saying, but her eyes followed in the direction Stheno pointed. A tall man with graying hair and a casual attitude exited the building. She assumed that was the focus of their mission. Nothing about his appearance indicated that he was the cruel oppressor Stheno claimed, but Poseidon gave off a refined and elegant air, too, and he had turned out to be a monster, at least figuratively.

The man walked alone, which surprised Medusa. She’d never known an aristocrat to travel without servants. In their time, it was a sign of prosperity to be surrounded by as many people as possible. This not only looked impressive, but helped stave off assassination attempts. Unless, of course, the assassin was in one’s personal staff, which was just as likely as not.

Stheno had explained that this was his tradition: an afternoon assignation. It apparently was no secret, yet Mr. Ramsey wasn’t likely to bring along company. Once a week at this time he left his office to take a short walk to a nearby residential building. A woman waited there for him, one of many that he kept on the side, while his news network news railed against the destruction of family values.

Stheno was first on the move as the media mogul turned the corner and continued on his way to his destination.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Medusa focused on the crowded streets full of potential witnesses as she and Euryale followed. “Out in public? In the middle of the day?”

“That’s the purpose of this exercise,” Stheno said as they turned the corner and caught sight of the man again. It didn’t matter if they temporarily lost him. They knew where he was going. “To make a public statement. But don’t worry. I’ve chosen a safe location for us to work our magic. We should be fine.”

Medusa wasn’t exactly reassured by her sister’s words. She hadn’t even been back for a day and already Stheno was putting her life in jeopardy. Magic didn’t seem commonplace in this era. It certainly wasn’t as prevalent as it had been in their time of gods and goddesses, heroes and monsters. That might make Medusa and her sisters more powerful than the average person on these streets, but those without magical gifts—or curses—proved to be surprisingly resourceful when it came to their fear of people with magic.

Perseus had used Medusa’s own power against her when he’d attacked. She could not begin to imagine what people could do in this age with their modern technology. To say nothing of these “Charmed Ones” whose powers her sisters had tapped into for her resurrection.

Medusa tried to push her concerns from her mind as their target’s stroll took him into a small park. It was more crowded than Medusa would have expected for the middle of a workday, but there were plenty of trees and natural greenery to obscure the view and allow them to do their work. This was the place that Stheno had selected for them to enact their plan as she waved her sisters off on their tasks.

Two paths branched off from the main thoroughfare, meeting up again by a copse of trees on the other side. Medusa was sent off on the path to her left. If they timed it right, they would meet up again when Ramsey reached the trees. Medusa would have to quicken her pace to make it happen, but she wasn't so sure that she wanted to get there first.

Euryale had taken the other side path while Stheno remained on the main thoroughfare that wound through the park for those in the mood for a leisurely stroll. Since Euryale had the most direct route, she would get to their victim first. It was little comfort to Medusa who still wasn't completely on board with this plan, but she pressed on anyway. It was the least she could do for the sisters who had brought her back to life. Stheno's methods might be questionable, but Medusa did not doubt that her intentions were good.

As anticipated, Euryale's path brought her to Ramsey just before he was about to enter through the trees and leave the park. Medusa was close enough that she could hear their conversation as she approached from his side.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Euryale asked as she headed off the man.

"It just got a little nicer," he replied as he stopped.

"Out enjoying the weather?" she asked. "Or going someplace special?"

"Nowhere special at all," he said. "Just killing time. And you?"

Medusa doubted the woman he was going to meet would appreciate that response, but his dismissive attitude was not something she felt required a magical response.

"Enjoying the day with my sisters," Euryale said. "We're looking for some fun."

"Sisters? Are they as beautiful as you?"

Euryale smiled. "See for yourself. Here's one of them now."

Medusa forced a smile as he turned her direction. "Hello," she said.

“Well, hello,” he replied with a smarmy smile. “This is turning into an unexpected pleasure.”

“Unexpected, certainly,” Stheno said as she joined him. “But the pleasure will be all ours.”

“I’m sure it will,” he said as he turned toward Stheno.

Ramsey’s eyes roamed as he took in the bodies of the three sisters, but his smile faltered when he realized he was surrounded. Medusa could practically see his mind working. Suspicion now filled his wandering eyes. Stheno’s plan for their approach had not been subtle. It wasn’t supposed to be. Medusa guessed that he was wishing he had some servants along to protect him.

The man’s posture stiffened. He shifted from casual to guarded. “Can I help you young women with anything?”

“Yes,” Stheno said. “You can look into my sister’s eyes.”

Medusa pushed aside her concerns and removed the dark glasses that covered her eyes. She saw the brief flash of fear on her victim’s face as he looked into her inhuman gaze. Calling on the power that she had not used since her death, Medusa willed her curse into action, paralyzing him immediately, freezing his terror forever. It was an expression she did not enjoy seeing, considering that it was aimed at her.

Stheno and Euryale’s hands were suddenly in her own. Medusa didn’t need them to finish what she had started, but they were much stronger together. Their powers combined as Vaughn Ramsey’s flesh turned to stone in the shadow of the trees while families played around them, completely unaware of the power in their midst.

Phoebe let herself into Piper’s house and hurried upstairs to the attic. Even though Phoebe had made her own home with her family a few years back,

the Manor was still what she pictured when she spoke of home. It would probably be that way even when her daughters went off to college.

The old Victorian-style Halliwell Manor had been in the family for over a century and would likely remain for another century at least, assuming their line remained intact that long. Their future was always in doubt, considering the number of demon attacks they fielded in the average year. Still, the family was growing rapidly through her own children as well as her nieces and nephews. The odds were in their favor. No telling what powers the next generation of Warren Witches would harness… or unleash upon the world.

A second staircase brought her up to the attic, which served as the Charmed Ones' war room for most of their magical lives. Phoebe wondered if their base of operations would switch to the Nexus now that Prue was back and effectively a captive there. The scene she walked in on suggested otherwise. "Seems like old times," Phoebe said as she took in the general chaos.

Piper stood behind the Book of Shadows, the family spellbook and their main source of reference. Leo had his own stack of books in front of him that Phoebe assumed he'd borrowed from Magic School. He taught classes all afternoon, so she assumed he must have called in a substitute to fill in for him while he focused on the current problem. The school probably had someone on call daily considering the number of unexpected emergencies that popped up in their lives.

Paige paced the attic while on her cell phone. From what Phoebe could make of the conversation, it sounded like she was speaking with Henry, checking his connections in the police department and the mortal side of the investigation. It wasn't as convenient as when they had Inspector Darryl Morris working with them from the inside, but Henry's contacts had helped out a lot over the years.

The newest element to the team meeting—or, the *returning* element—was patched in through the laptop that was set up on the lid of an old truck; the same trunk that Phoebe had found the Book of Shadows in so many years ago. Prue's face filled the screen. Like cell signals, Phoebe didn't know how her sister got some kind of magical Wi-Fi out in the middle of nowhere, but she was glad they could communicate and make it a little less lonely out there for her.

"How's it going?" Phoebe asked as she stepped into the room. Cole wasn't there at least. So there was some room for her to slip in without banging into people. It was a pretty big attic, but not one with infinite space.

"We've got a lot of information, but no way to narrow it down yet," Piper said. "You here to help?"

"Not quite," Phoebe said. "I came to do some research on my own magical issue. How about you show me yours and I'll show you mine?"

Piper nodded. "So far no other reports of people turning to stone. Or turning up missing."

"So it's possible that this was a single attack on the congressman and not the beginning of an epidemic?" Phoebe said.

"Possible," Prue chimed in. "But not definite. I'm keeping tabs on the congressman magically through the Nexus. If anything happens to him, we'll be alerted immediately."

"It probably doesn't come as much of a surprise, but there are a bunch of magical potions and spells that can turn people to stone," Piper said, moving along in the update. "Most are incredibly difficult to undo, so our relatively simple spell to turn Congressman Ward back to normal—"

"Such as he is," Paige added.

"—probably counts those out," Piper said. "That leaves a couple of weaker spells that any magical practitioner could do. Doesn't really point us in the direction of this week's villain."

“What about the congressman?” Phoebe asked. “Couldn’t he give a description of his attacker?”

“No memory of him, her, or it,” Prue answered from the computer.

“And the security cameras outside his office went down just as the attacker arrived,” Paige said as she ended her call. “Henry is trying to get access to the traffic cameras in the area, but that’s several levels of red tape. I wouldn’t expect an answer anytime soon.”

“If at all,” Prue added. “Whatever took the congressman’s cameras out probably did the same thing to any other recording devices in the area.”

“As for possible culprits who turn people to stone without the need for a spell, we’ve got a few.” Piper nodded to Leo.

“It probably comes as no surprise at this point, but a lot of things can wield that particular brand of magic,” Leo said. “I compiled a list, but the top choices are a basilisk—which I’m sure you all know about considering the popularity of a certain boy wizard—a type of elf known as a svartálfar, and a cockatrice.”

“You think he was attacked by a parrot?” Paige said.

“Not a cockatoo,” Leo explained. “A cockatrice is a dragon with the head of a rooster.”

“Oh yeah, that makes much more sense,” Paige replied.

“In my vision the congressman didn’t react like some kind of bizarre creature had entered the office,” Phoebe said. “It seemed more like a person. Or something that could disguise itself to look like a person? What about Medusa? Isn’t she like the most popular person in history when it comes to stories of people turning to stone? Why aren’t we starting with her?”

Leo sighed. “Well, that’s the thing. According to history, Medusa was mortal.”

“A mortal that could turn people to stone?” Piper asked.

“Mortal in the context that she could die,” Leo explained. “She had powers, although no one’s sure what she was before she became a gorgon. According to legend, she was cursed with the power to turn people to stone, along with getting a horrible new monstrous body. The stories are all kind of mixed up over the centuries. It’s possible she had some kind of magic before she was cursed. Some people think she and her sisters were witches. Kind of an ancient Greek version of the Charmed Ones. But the one thing all these stories have in common is that Medusa had a mortal lifespan and she died.”

“People come back from the dead,” Prue needlessly reminded everyone.

“Which is why I wouldn’t say it’s impossible,” Leo agreed. “Also her sisters, though much less famous, were actually immortal. So there’s a chance they could be involved. But they’re far less powerful than Medusa.”

“And why would they suddenly start turning people to stone after all this time?” Piper added. “They’ve been quietly living their lives for centuries. Why go evil now?”

“A good question,” Leo replied. “That’s why I didn’t include them on the list. I mean, there’s a chance, but I’m not seeing it without more information.”

“Okay then,” Phoebe said. “Anything else?”

“There is a sect of trolls that turn to stone in the sunlight,” Leo suggested. “Maybe the congressman is a troll.”

“Safe bet,” Phoebe and Paige said in unison.

“And you?” Piper asked with a nod toward Phoebe.

The advice columnist filled them in on what little she’d learned since her brief reappearance at the Nexus. It took less than a minute and ended with Phoebe shoving in beside Piper. “If you’re done with the Book of Shadows, mind if I have a go?”

Piper stepped away from the podium. “Have at it. I’ve done all I can do.”

A pink glow lit the room as Coop materialized between the two sisters. “Hello, everyone,” he said with a wave before seeing Prue on the screen. “Hi, Prue!”

“It’s getting crowded up there,” Prue said from her perch on the trunk.

“If we get Henry and the kids we could have a party,” Paige added.

Coop gave his wife a kiss on the forehead. “You filled them in on what’s up?”

“Just got done with it,” she replied. “What did you learn?”

“I’m happy to report that Romeo and Juliet are still happily in love,” Coop said. “To be safe, I’ve got them on lockdown at Cupid’s temple. Kama’s keeping an eye on them. Whatever is going on, we don’t want them mixed up in it. Those two souls have suffered enough over the centuries.”

“Good thinking,” Phoebe said. “What’s our next move?”

Coop looked around the room. “You know, we have enough people here that we could keep an eye on the other couples on your list. The ones that haven’t broken up yet. See if anything strange happens.”

“That’s not going to work,” Paige said as she held up her phone. “I figured downloading that new local news app might be a good idea. It just paid off. Breaking news.”

Everyone in the room crowded around Paige’s phone to read the tiny print on the screen as she opened it up to the short article inside.

“That’s not good,” Piper said.

“Hey there!” Prue called “A little help for those of us not in the room!”

“Another statue turned up in the city,” Piper explained. “Vaughn Ramsey. You might not know him. He’s the head of one of those cable networks that call themselves a news organization but is really a shill for a political agenda.

“A not-so-progressive political agenda,” Paige added. “Like the kind the congressman supports.”

“I’m beginning to sense a theme,” Prue said. “But that’s considered breaking news these days?”

“Ramsey owns a local station too,” Phoebe explained. “The story is being run by a competing network. Their take on the statue is that it’s some bad attempt at a viral marketing campaign that’s vandalizing a park. Not so much news or human interest as it is an attempt at embarrassing the competition. It doesn’t mention anything about the congressman, so I think we managed to avert that story.”

“The important part is where they say that Ramsey is unavailable for comment,” Paige added. “I doubt this is a coincidence.”

“We should check it out,” Piper said.

Phoebe looked to the Book of Shadows and then counted heads in the room along with the one onscreen. “Can you all do it without me? I want to work on this love problem with my readers before it becomes more of a story.”

Piper and Paige shared a look, but didn’t say anything. Leo stepped forward, clearly taking one for the team. “Phoebe, I get what you’re saying, but I think the bigger story here is going to be the statues. These are some notable men being turned to stone. If this gets picked up on a national level, whoever is doing it could out the magical community to the world.”

“He’s got a point,” Coop said. “Leo and I can look into your couples. We’ll find out what’s going on. Besides, you won’t be of any use to us if you keep collapsing when you get near them. Frankly, we might find out more without you, I’m sorry to say.”

Phoebe knew he was right, but she felt personally obligated to her readers. “The two of you can’t cover all the rest of the couples yourselves.”

“Take Cole,” Prue chimed in from the computer. “He’s not exactly been getting along well with our guests from the magical community and has been driving me crazy since he got back.”

“Hey!” Cole’s voice came out of the background. “I’m right here.”

“Well then go there before you kill a leprechaun. I don’t need any more bad luck around here.” Prue must have realized what she was suggesting because when she looked back at the screen her focus was on Phoebe. “If that’s okay with you.”

Phoebe looked to her husband with the question in her eyes.

“Fine with me,” Coop said with a shrug. “The more, the merrier.”

“Fine with us,” Phoebe replied through a fairly forced smile.

CHAPTER 11

Paige orbed herself and her sisters into the park at the edge of the Financial District after a quick trip around the globe to pick up the potion Prue had been working on with her temporary guests from the magical community. She had been almost as glad as Cole when the completed potion meant the dwarf, fairy, and leprechaun were free to leave. Even she wasn't that desperate for company.

Once again, Paige's magic had deposited them behind a tree, which was particularly convenient in this case. One peek told Paige that getting at this statue was not going to be as easy as it had been at the Presidio that morning.

A small crowd had gathered around the stone body of Vaughn Ramsey. Every single one of the people surrounding him had a phone in hand snapping pictures and recording video of the statue, like it was the newest attraction at Madame Tussauds Wax Museum.

Paige didn't get the attraction since it was just an odd statue in a park. She assumed it had something to do with the fact that so many people had a very low opinion of this particular public figure and would take any opportunity to have some fun at his expense. A random statue of the divisive media mogul popping up in the middle of a park paid for with public tax dollars had some kind of potential for scandal. Who would want to miss out on that?

Piper breathed in the air, which was not so fresh given that they were on a block surrounded by office buildings and surface streets filled with mid-

day traffic. “Two parks in one day. The kids would love this.”

Phoebe chuckled mournfully. “Something tells me they’ll have the chance to visit many parks in their lives… and cemeteries… and the Underworld.”

Piper smacked her sister lightly on the arm. “Way to bring us down.”

“Yes, I’m sorry I’m not more cheerful at the latest potential demon attack.”

Now Piper glared at her sister.

Phoebe forced a smile. “Okay, I really am sorry for being such a downer. But I’m not used to magic messing with my readers. I hate that I’m here while the guys are working on it. This one’s just a bit more personal.”

Paige completely understood what Phoebe was saying, but they needed to focus on the issue at hand. She redirected their attention to the commotion near the park entrance. “We’ve got to put our resources where they’re most useful. It looks like Leo was right. This is becoming a story.”

Phoebe took a deep breath. She didn’t look like she wanted to move on from the subject at hand, but she adjusted. “I texted Elise. So far our paper is the only one that knows about the congressman. Considering the police were involved, the Presidio groundskeepers have a missing statue on their hands—or *not* on their hands—and anyone out for an early morning stroll might have seen it, I doubt the news will stay in-house for long. She’s embargoed the story in the meantime. It won’t go up on the website for now. She can keep it out of the paper until at least a third statue goes up. Right now it’s a minor human interest piece.”

“Let’s hope we can stop it from becoming front page territory,” Paige said.

Piper shook her head in confusion. “It’s a statue that popped up inexplicably in the middle of a park. That’s a very broad definition of human interest.”

“And yet it looks like it’s about to go viral,” Paige said with a nod to all the cameras.

“Well then the Charmed Ones will have to stop that from happening,” Piper said as she raised her hands and froze everyone in the park.

Phoebe checked to see that her sister got everyone and then turned her attention to the crowded streets around them. “Okay. What now? We can’t exactly make off with the statue like last time. I’d say the dozen people filming it might notice when they unfreeze and they’re just staring at each other. Then it becomes actual news.”

Piper started for the statue. “We can’t wait around all day for the coast to be clear. We’ll undo the statue spell, find out what we can, then I can freeze him and we can put him under a glamour so that he looks stone and keep him here until we figure out a way to return him to his normal life as inconspicuously as possible.”

“And in the meantime, if a few pigeons drop by to visit, so be it,” Paige said. “I’m okay with this plan.”

Piper led the way as the Charmed Ones carefully slipped into the small crowd around the granite media mogul. Paige could see that she was extra careful not to bump any of the looky-loos for fear of releasing them from their frozen state. It was something of a challenge because they were packed in so tight. Like being in a museum of frozen statues all gathered around an actual statue. Not her idea of a fun outing.

Piper held out a hand. “Potion!”

Paige pulled the small glass vial from her pocket. The swirling green and gold liquid sparkled in the light. “Here we go! Concentrated magical community.”

Phoebe watched the vial as it passed between sisters. “If only we’d thought to do this before. It might have cut down on our interactions with some of the more… interesting members of the community.”

“Something tells me they would have gotten involved in other ways,” Piper said as she received the vial. “It’s not like they’ve ever waited for a formal invitation from us.”

Piper uncorked the vial and raised it to the head of the statue. Ramsey was slightly too tall for her to reach the top of his head, so she settled on his face. “Ready?”

Paige took Piper’s free hand and then grabbed onto Phoebe. “Ready.”

The sisters took a breath, then spoke together: “To free a man stopped in his tracks, add fairy dust, a dash of luck, and the pick of an ax.” Piper splashed the potion into the man’s face and the sisters stepped back while it poured down his body. They released hands while waiting for the potion to take effect, eventually realizing nothing was going to happen.

Phoebe knocked on the still solid statue. “Well, that’s odd.”

Paige tilted her head. “That should have worked. Frankly, considering how easy it was to undo the congressman statue, I figured if anything we had too much power with that potion.”

“Maybe we need the actual dust, luck, and ax instead of it in its distilled form?” Piper suggested.

Phoebe shook her head. “But Prue compensated for that in the potion.”

“Piper!” Paige pointed to the park’s other entrance where a family of four were coming in with their dog.

“Got ’em.” Piper held up her hands and the family froze in their tracks. She even got the dog to make sure he didn’t run away while his family wasn’t able to control him.

Paige turned her attention back to the statue. “Should we try another basic Power of Three spell? Maybe we didn’t need Prue’s assist from the Nexus this morning.”

“Worth a try,” Phoebe said as they took hands again, closed their eyes and concentrated.

“The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free!”

When they opened their eyes again, none of them were too surprised to see that the statue was still stone.

Piper sighed. “I hate to say this, but maybe we need Prue to give us a little Nexus boost.”

“I hate to agree with it, but I think you’re right,” Phoebe said. “But we can’t do that too often. Something about that magic didn’t feel right to me.”

Piper laid a hand on the statue and looked to Paige. “Okay then. We’re going to need to take him with us.”

Paige looked around the largely frozen park. Sure, no one around them would notice them disappearing thanks to Piper’s magic, but anyone else could easily stumble into the park. To say nothing of all the surrounding buildings with plenty of windows overlooking the space. Someone was bound to notice no one was moving after a while. “How?”

Piper held out a hand. “Quickly.”

Paige didn’t waste time arguing. She took both her sisters by the hand and focused her power on orbing them and the statue back around the globe. She barely had the time to wish that she could wrack up some frequent flier miles for the amount of distances she’d been traveling lately before they were all staring at a completely unsurprised Prue taking them all in.

“This housewarming present isn’t any better than the last,” Prue said dryly.

Piper took her eldest sister’s hand while she still held onto the others, forming a circle around the statue of Vaughn Ramsey. “The potion didn’t work. We need to do what we did earlier.”

“It didn’t work?” Prue asked. “I’m surprised. It really should—”

“Sorry, Prue,” Piper said. “We’ve got to get him back before anyone notices he’s gone. I don’t know how long the people in the park will stay frozen while I’m on the other side of the world.”

“Say no more.” Prue closed her eyes and focused on the power at the center of the Nexus of the All.

Paige kept her eyes open for a moment, focusing them on her eldest sister. None of them understood Prue’s connection to the Nexus and it worried them all that she was trapped over such a powerful magical convergence. Paige was more than a little wary of this new world order, which didn’t ease when she felt a wave of nausea as the Nexus tried to connect with her own power.

“I’ve got it,” Prue said.

“Yeah,” Phoebe said, sounding woozy. “We know.”

The sisters didn’t waste another moment.

“The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free!”

When they opened their eyes, they were shocked to see that it didn’t work.

“One more time,” Prue suggested.

The Charmed Ones shared a skeptical look, but didn’t question it.

“The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free! The Power of Three will set you free!”

Nothing.

Paige let out a huff of air. “What now? The spell on the congressman was so easy this morning. Why won’t this work?”

“Phoebe, see if you can get a vision from him,” Piper said. “Find out how this one is different from the congressman.”

Phoebe stepped closer to the statuary. She laid her hands on his chest, probably disgusted by the fact that she had to actually touch this guy. Paige

was glad that so far she'd managed to not have to interact with the sleazeball even though he was in a stone form.

Paige watched as her sister closed her eyes and tried to evoke an image from the past. Paige always wondered what that was like for Phoebe. Paige's magic worked so naturally for her that she hardly had to concentrate to call on the orbs that moved things around for her. But there had to be more involved with Phoebe's power. The opportunity to see the future or the past must have required some form of concentration. There's a whole lot of nothing in most people's lives. The special part of Phoebe's power was that she could hone in on the exact moment that mattered to whatever situation they were dealing with. Hopefully, she was doing just that right now.

The resigned look on Phoebe's face as she opened her eyes suggested she hadn't had any success. "Nothing," she said. "Not even a blip."

"Why is this suddenly so difficult?" Prue asked. "It was all relatively easy this morning. Are we dealing with the same magic?"

"Something's different," Phoebe said.

"We don't have time to analyze it," Piper said. "We've got to get this back to the park. Or maybe what we need is to get a reasonable facsimile back in its place."

"We can't just make another statue," Phoebe said.

"Why not?" Piper said.

"Because none of us is a sculptress or has the money or time to commission a piece," Paige reminded her. "Our powers don't exactly work that way."

Piper crossed her arms. "Prue's does."

Prue barked out a laugh. "What are you talking about?"

Piper ticked off some examples on her fingers. "You can make the Nexus into whatever you want it to be. You turned it from the Manor to a

castle. Filled a library with books. Why can't you make a replacement for this guy?"

"But my power doesn't extend past the Nexus," Prue reminded her. "It would disappear the moment it cleared the area."

"Would it?" Piper asked. "It's the Nexus of the *All*, a convergence point for magic that exists all over the world. Why can't a piece of it be orbed to San Francisco?"

"Because that's not how it works," Prue said.

"The potion made it to San Francisco," Paige pointed out.

"The potion was made from magic taken from other places," Prue explained. "All the spell ingredients I've got here arrived magically from someplace else. It's different from when I call up a new couch in the living room so there are seats for everyone when you bring the kids for a visit. Things like that… I don't know… maybe it's made out of the sand beneath us? But it's different from the potion ingredients. It's like the Nexus knows what that stuff is being used for and compensates."

"It's worth a try," Phoebe said. "We don't have a lot of other options at the moment. Whoever comes to remove this statue from the park might do a better job keeping an eye on it than those guys this morning. This could be our only chance to study it and figure out what turned him to stone."

"And to free him from his granite prison before anyone notices the guy really is missing," Piper added.

Prue stepped up to the statue examining it closely. "I'm pretty sure I can replicate it. But I'm worried about what will happen once he leaves this place."

"Maybe the Nexus will compensate." Piper gave Prue a supportive pat on the back. "But let's focus on one thing at a time. If you can't make a good enough likeness, it doesn't matter what happens next. Enough people already got pictures of the statue. If it comes back looking totally different

some of them will notice. Good thing you've always had an eye for these kinds of things. Unless you're afraid you've lost your touch. It's been a long time since you worked at Buckland's."

"Sounds like a challenge to me," Paige said.

"I'd lay money on it," Phoebe agreed. "I'm just not sure which side is the best financial investment."

Prue's smile indicated she knew her sisters were goading her on purpose. And that she was ready for the challenge. She waved a hand slowly over the statue, starting at its feet. As her hand moved up the body, a duplicate statue slowly formed beside the frozen man, beginning with his shoes and going all the way to the top of his perfectly coiffed head.

Prue stepped aside as soon as she was done and her sisters filled in her spot, examining the new statue. Paige looked back and forth between the original and the replica, comparing the two stone works of art. She couldn't see any difference between them at all.

"Should have made that bet," Prue said as her smile shifted to one that was deservedly smug.

Knowing they didn't have a lot of time, Paige placed a hand on the duplicate statue and reached out for Piper. "We'll take this guy to the park and come right back." She and Piper were gone without another word.

The park was still frozen when they returned, which was good because Paige had dropped them right in the middle of the circle. She didn't waste any time orbing her and her sister back to the tree they'd originally hidden behind on their first trip. Piper unfroze everyone just as a couple entering the park was about to walk into the family that Piper had frozen earlier. Their frightened dog hopped up on one of the kids, but no one else seemed to have noticed that anything was wrong.

The commotion around the statue grew, pulling Paige and Piper's attention back to the replaced object. Even at a distance they could see

something was wrong. The statue that Prue had so carefully recreated was melting. Slowly at first, but then it collapsed into the ground, pooling at the people's feet before completely disappearing from the park.

Paige held her breath as she waited. After an interminable pause, everyone that had been around the statue broke out into applause. She sighed with relief when she heard the reaction. "Well, that answers one question about Prue's powers. Hopefully, everyone will assume the melting statue really was some weird kind of viral marketing campaign."

Piper took her sister's hand. "Yeah, but we better get back and figure out what's going on before Vaughn Ramsey's disappearance goes from marketing campaign to lead news story."

Paige bounced them back across the globe without comment. Whatever power was at play here, she suspected this was far from the end of the plan. Even though they'd only just left the Manor, she hoped the guys were having better luck than they were. Paige had the feeling that this was going to be a very long day for everyone.

CHAPTER 12

Coop hung up the phone, disappointed by the news but not surprised. There were only so many times members of the extended family could skip out on their jobs and still maintain their employment. Considering that Henry was one of the few relatives who actually earned physical money in exchange for his work, it was hard to put too much pressure on the guy.

“Who’s Henry going to cover?” Leo asked from the couch in the sitting room when he saw that Coop was off the phone.

“No go,” Coop replied. “He’s got meetings scheduled with parolees this afternoon. For some reason he can’t drop everything to join us.”

“How dare he have a mortal job with normal responsibilities as a member of this family,” Leo joked. Though there was definite humor in his tone, Coop couldn’t help but notice some disappointment in his expression.

An extra pair of eyes would have been helpful in monitoring the situation. Phoebe did have more couples on her list than they could handle on their own. No matter how enthusiastic he’d been in his efforts to convince his wife that they had things handled, Coop suspected more of her readers would be on their road to divorce before the day was out. Coop tried to match Leo’s fake smile. “On the bright side, he’ll be near the police station in case one of us gets pulled in for stalking. Staking out people’s houses probably isn’t something they like civilians to do.”

“Then it would be good if the civilians didn’t get caught,” Cole said as he appeared at the base of the staircase somewhat overdressed for a person

who spent most of his time lounging around a castle waiting to run mystical errands. “So what’s the plan?”

Coop looked down at his jeans and cozy red sweater and decided he preferred relaxed comfort over the classic cut of silk suits. This was much a more appropriate outfit for someone with two small children at home.

Since Cole was apparently one to get right down to business, Coop held up his phone with the list of names and addresses that Phoebe had forwarded to him and didn’t bother with pleasantries. “The plan is we split up and keep an eye on the people on this list.”

Cole nodded slowly in a way that suggested he was not a fan of Coop’s plan.

“You have a better idea?” Coop asked.

“I do.” Cole moved into the living room. He pulled down the decorative ribbon that Piper had hung over it in some odd fit of decorative panache she’d experienced after the last in-home demon attack. “Leo? Does Piper have any bay leaves in the house.”

“As both a chef and a Charmed One, she’d be offended by that question.” Leo was already heading for the kitchen. “Of course she does.”

“What about belladonna?”

Leo stopped mid-stride and made an abrupt turn and. “That we keep locked up in the attic.”

“What about—”

Leo held up a hand. “Cole, I’m fairly certain we’ve got whatever it is you need to do whatever it is you’re going to do. Just give me the list.”

“A little bit of natural magic might be able to help us out here,” Cole said. “We’ll also need some damiana, mugwort, and marigold.”

“There’s a vase of marigolds in the conservatory, but I can get everything else from the attic.” Leo bounded up the staircase taking two at a time.

“So…” Coop said to fill the silence once he was alone with his wife’s ex, although he wasn’t sure what the next part of the sentence was. He and Cole had spent a fair amount of time together since the former demon’s return from the void, but not a lot of it was with just the two of them. Aside from Phoebe, Coop couldn’t think of much they had in common. Certainly their clothing style was far from the only difference. “How’s living on the Nexus?”

“Marginally more exciting that an existence between life and death.”

Coop nodded. “At least you get to go out and visit.”

“There’s that,” Cole said. “But then I’m leaving Prue stuck there by herself.”

“Yeah,” Coop said as an awkward silence filled the room. “I’ll go get those marigolds.”

Coop didn’t quite run through the sitting room, but his exit was maybe a little faster than it would have been under normal circumstances. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Cole. Phoebe’s ex had proven to be a valuable ally since his return. It was clear that he was over Phoebe, or at least that they both had accepted their current lives and moved on. Coop wasn’t jealous, but he also wasn’t sure how to behave around the man.

There would always be a side of Phoebe that Coop would never know like Cole had. True, some of that was a darker side that she never wanted to experience again, but it was still an integral part of the woman she’d become by the time he had married her. Of course, all that was way too deep a subject matter for small talk.

The clinking of glass preceded the sound of footsteps on the staircase. Leo’s arms were loaded with bottles of chopped, diced, and dried herbs by the time Coop returned with a single yellow marigold from the vase in the conservatory.

Cole was still waiting for them beside the large mirror built into the wooden fireplace mantle. “How many couples are on the list?”

“Six,” Coop replied, realizing what Cole had intended. “Too many for my ring to show us. We’d have to keep cycling through the couples and risk missing something.”

“We *could* do it here, but I’m not sure this mirror would work for what we need.”

The mantle had one large mirror in the center, bordered by six smaller mirrors. If Cole intended to use the glass to spy on the couples, they would have the number of mirrors they needed, but the images would be rather small. It seemed like Cole thought the same thing since he turned away from the mirror to take in the view of the living room, before realizing what they needed was two rooms away. “Come with me.”

Bright sunlight streamed in through the windows of the conservatory, feeding the potted plants and making the room slightly warmer than the rest of the house. Cole pointed to the wall made of tall clear windows bordered by smaller colored glass. “Help me move the furniture. We need to have an unobstructed view of these six windows.”

Coop held the marigold stem in his mouth while he grabbed the other end of the wicker couch, helping Cole get it out of the way. Leo put the bottles of herbs down on the glass table with the vase of marigolds and picked up one of the chairs. Once the furniture was on other side of the room, they slid a few potted plants to the side as well, leaving six slightly spotty windows free to look through.

Cole picked the bottles off the table and handed two of them to Coop. “Hold these. When I’m ready for them, I’ll want the bay leaves and then the belladonna.” He smiled as he looked up at Coop’s face. “Marigold last.”

Coop blushed as he realized the flower was still between his teeth. He quickly removed it with the hand that held the bay leaves. He did not want

that poisonous belladonna anywhere near his mouth.

It was no surprise when Cole pulled a silk handkerchief from his pocket. Of course he was armed with fine cloth. Why wouldn't he be? He used it to wipe away some of the spots on the glass before unstopping the bottle of mugwort and pouring some into his palm.

Cole threw the magical herbs up against the nearest window before repeating the process five more times as he went down the line. Some of the mugwort stuck to the glass, but most of it dropped to the floor. Coop doubted that mattered since Cole didn't seem concerned about it in the least. Leo's eyes were tracking the mess being made and Coop assumed it would all be cleaned up before Piper got home.

Leo and Coop watched as Cole repeated the process with the damiana. Then Coop handed over the bay leaves and belladonna as Cole had asked. When he got to the last bottle of herbs, Cole poured a small amount of the poisonous belladonna into his handkerchief before dabbing it lightly on the glass. "We'll want to clean this up before the kids get home."

"Oh, yes," Leo replied. "That goes without saying."

"Just one more thing." Cole held out a hand and Coop passed along the marigold. Cole crumpled the flower in his hand and sprinkled the crushed petals onto the six glass panes before wiping his hands together to clean them off. Coop was genuinely surprised that he didn't pull out a small bottle of antibacterial soap. "That should prep the windows."

"Just what kind of magic do you still possess?" Coop asked warily. "I thought you weren't a demon anymore."

Cole shrugged as if that were enough of an explanation. "I don't have the magic required to activate the spell." He pointed down to Coop's ring. "For that we need a power source."

Coop smiled with understanding. "I can take it from here."

The Cupid waved his hand over the first window as his ring glowed with a pinkish-white light. He concentrated on the first name on the list and up popped a man and a woman in the middle of a picnic lunch on what looked like to be the floor of an empty house. For a moment he worried that it was another couple on the verge of moving out, but the way they were feeding one another made it seem pretty clear that they were still in love. Perhaps, this place was a new start for them, a first home together that signified they were in this marriage forever. Then again, if whatever infected the other couples with hate got to this pair, they were already boxed up for a separation.

Coop pushed that dark thought from his mind as he moved down the line of windows and brought up images of the other couples. Only one of the other pairings on the list was together at the moment. The rest were each in separate locations from their partners. It made sense. Not everyone could skip out from their jobs in the middle of the day like Coop and his family had the luxury to do.

In each of the cases where the people weren't together, Cole's magic split the image in the window so they could see both halves of the couple at the same time. The conservatory with its many glass windows was definitely the right way to go. They never would have all fit into the mirror over the mantle.

So far, nothing seemed out of place. The two couples that were together seemed very much *together*. They weren't fighting or revealing anything like the kind of anger Coop and Phoebe had experienced earlier. The other couples just seemed to be going about their business as if it were a typical day. Nothing appeared as if they'd experienced a sudden, unexpected end to their marriages.

If Coop had been in the room with any of them he could have reached out with his empathic abilities to confirm his suspicions, but he didn't really

need to do that. He'd spent enough time as a Cupid to recognize both love and heartbreak at first glance. Nothing any of these couples exhibited showed that they were anything but content in their lives.

"Now what?" Leo asked.

"Now we wait." Cole pulled the wicker chair back so that it faced the windows and sat down. "Anybody have a good card game to pass the time? I have a feeling this is going to be a slow afternoon."

CHAPTER 13

Medusa sipped on some kind of blended iced-coffee drink that her sister had insisted she try. Euryale had called it the true nectar of the gods, but Medusa wasn't as easily impressed. The drink wasn't nearly as good as the chocolate and peanut butter treat she'd had earlier. Perhaps not everything about this future world she woken into was better than the one she'd left behind.

So far in the little time she'd been above ground, Medusa was enjoying what she'd experienced, lackluster iced coffee aside. The modern conveniences of this world were beyond what she could have ever imagined back in the time of Plato. This city of San Francisco was louder and much more densely packed than her former homeland, but not overwhelmingly so. There was a diversity to the people here than she had never witnessed before, both in their bodies and the way they carried themselves. It was difficult to believe that with all the different ways that people moved so freely in this century anyone could still be oppressed.

Medusa wasn't foolish enough to believe that what her sisters said wasn't true. The people of Greece had been incredibly forward thinking while still set in their ways. Change was difficult. She'd seen images of horrible oppression in the visions her sisters had shared, but there had been glimpses of exceptional progress too.

Stheno grew agitated as she slid her finger across the surface of a computer-type device. Medusa's mind was so jumbled with the information her sisters had placed in there that she was having trouble connecting some

of the dots, although she was getting better at understanding modern colloquialisms.

These magic boxes were apparently computing devices filled with the sum total knowledge of human existence. She understood that there was a connection between the old bulky computers and these newer, streamlined metal devices that were roughly the thickness of a few sheets of papyrus. She just didn't quite get how they worked. Or why that knowledge would make her sister so angry.

Stheno slammed the device on the café table. "No one is reporting on Ramsey yet."

"Really?" Euryale asked. "Weren't you just watching a video?"

"A couple of posts on tube sites," Stheno replied. "One local news story quickly relegated to the humor page. Not a single news organization has picked it up as an actual piece."

"Well of course not," Euryale said. "They don't realize the statue is actually Ramsey. They probably just think it's a statue. Give it time. Word will spread."

Stheno pressed a button and the screen went dark. "With a little help from us."

Medusa didn't like the look in her sister's eyes or the smile tugging at her lips. "What are you planning?"

"It's time to step things up. Show the world what we can do."

"Reveal ourselves?" Euryale asked with an eye toward her younger sister.

Medusa tensed, but Stheno quickly took her hand to calm her nerves. "I have taken great pains to ensure that our work goes unnoticed for as long as possible. But there are ways to get our message out while we remain anonymous."

“*Your* message,” Medusa said. “I’ve barely had a taste of this new world beyond the sweets Euryale has been filling me with. I am forever grateful for what you’ve done in bringing me back to life, but can’t all this wait? Is the need so pressing—?”

Stheno gently squeezed her sister’s hand. “I’m sorry. I forgot how new this all is to you. Euryale and I have watched this oppressive society for centuries. We have seen horrors that we never showed you, both large and small.”

Medusa looked out at the people passing by. Each of them was lost in their own thoughts, but no one seemed overtly miserable. Some people were laughing together and carrying on animated conversations. “It doesn’t seem so horrific. This new world is actually rather pleasant.”

“On the surface, yes,” Stheno said. “But let us show you what lurks underneath. Not the images we fill your head with. You need to see it with your own eyes.”

Medusa adjusted her sunglasses, making sure that no one could see what she hid behind them. “That was unkind.”

Stheno shook her head. “I wasn’t referring to the curse. But don’t forget that the stronger we become the more control you will have over your power. Soon enough you won’t need those glasses. It won’t require so much energy for us to hide our monstrous forms. We will be free to act individually. At that point, you can go off and live the life you dream of, though I suspect once you embrace our mission you will want to continue the work that we’re doing.”

“I kind of like our other forms,” Euryale said breezily, missing the point entirely. “Makes us unique in this world of boring blandness. I mean, don’t get me wrong. This body is gorgeous, but a change every now and then can be interesting.”

Medusa laughed. Even in the darkest moments, Euryale would look to the light. But Stheno was right. Not many people would share her middle sister's opinion of their cursed forms. Medusa certainly didn't. Neither did Stheno if the silent rage that filled her expression was any indication as she rose from her seat. "It's time you met our next target."

Medusa considered finishing her drink, but threw it in the trash receptacle while it was still half full. She did not enjoy the aftertaste that clung in her mouth and couldn't see why Euryale had been so enthusiastic about it. Medusa also didn't know why Euryale was holding a small plastic container out to her, but she took one of the round tablets inside. She watched as her sister took one as well and put it in her mouth. With a shrug, Medusa did the same. The moment it touched her tongue she felt a burst of refreshing mint and understood. She smiled her thanks in Euryale's direction.

The one upside to their journey was that Stheno had led them to the trolley stop. Medusa had been entranced when she first saw the vehicle on the street. It carried more people than any single horse could hold, at least any horse not of Trojan origin. The bell that rang out through the valleys of buildings was almost cheerful in its sound. She had been hoping to have the chance to ride one, and this part of the plan did not disappoint.

Medusa leaned out the side of the trolley to let the wind blow through in her hair. She imagined the snakes enjoying themselves as well. Even beneath her glamour, it was hard to forget that her head carried a nest of vipers. The curse would always be with Medusa, but her sisters had allowed her a second chance at life. She did not want to be defined by her deformity, no matter how it could be hidden on the surface.

There hadn't been a lot of time for Medusa to stop and think of what she wanted from this new life in this modern world. Stheno had seen to that with her obsession over her plan to right the wrongs of the world. It was a

noble purpose, but one that could probably use more thought. Medusa loved her big sister, but was also aware of how controlling Stheno could be. That had not changed in the millennia since they had last seen one another. It had only gotten worse.

It was hard to blame Stheno for her reaction to the world that had evolved in Medusa's absence. Who was she to say how her sisters should react to all that they had gone through in their lives? It could not have been easy to be a woman bearing witness to some of the worst atrocities in history. Medusa trusted her sisters enough to know that they were looking out for her as well as others. This mission they were on served a purpose. It was not simply about vengeance. Their intentions were not that single-minded.

Medusa's crowded mind kept her from fully enjoying the ride. It was over before too long, as Stheno instructed them to descend from the trolley in a neighborhood closer to the water. The buildings weren't as big as in their previous destination, but still larger than any Medusa had been in during her first life. The designs had more artistry than the glass and concrete monstrosities in the other part of town and the people seemed more casually dressed, but in just as much of a rush to get to their destinations.

"Who are we here to see?" Medusa asked.

"The business owner who runs that." Stheno pointed to a red brick building on the corner. It was smaller than most of the structures in the area, but still an impressive size to someone with her limited experience in the world.

From the outside, it wasn't clear what type of business operated within its walls, but that didn't matter. All Medusa could focus on was the round, stone sign beside the entrance. "Is that… us?"

“A crude representation, but yes,” Stheno said as she led her sister to the carved portrait. The three carved faces looked nothing like the sisters, but the heads full of vipers left little doubt as to the intention.

As bad as Medusa thought her curse appeared outside of her glamour, this was even worse. “What… how?”

“We’re legends,” Euryale said with barely contained glee. “Well, mainly you. Somehow Stheno and I got the short end of the celebrity stick. Not that I’m complaining. Makes it easier to live incognito when no one really knows about you. Good thing, too, since our powers were so weak without you here to give us a boost.”

Medusa recognized the words Euryale spoke in the modern language she was using, but the meaning of the statements completely escaped her. She looked to Stheno for more of an explanation.

“Your legend has grown over the centuries,” Stheno said. “People paint you as a monster to be feared rather than as a victim of vengeful imposter gods. They focus on the gorgon created by Athena’s curse. No one knows of the exceptional witch who championed the innocent.”

Medusa nodded slowly. She was accustomed to being feared. Athena’s curse had seen to that. But she had expected that fear would have been tempered with age. She’d assumed that her story had been lost to time. To see the representation of herself and her sisters on a modern building was a shock to say the least. Her hand reached out for the smooth stone. “And this?”

“A website called the Gorgon Gaze,” Stheno explained. “It’s a revenge site dedicated to shaming women who fall in love with married men. The owner has built a small empire out of the idea that women are completely to blame for the wandering eyes of men. She’s written books and hosted seminars. She even sells T-shirts with that logo emblazoned across the chest.”

“She?” Medusa asked. “Our next victim is a woman? We’re attacking women?”

Stheno shook her head in disbelief. “Athena was a woman. Gender shouldn’t be a default protection when you are betraying your own. That makes it even worse as far as I’m concerned.”

There was something about what Stheno was saying that didn’t sit right with Medusa. To see a woman owning a business and leading enough of a staff to fill this building was something that Medusa couldn’t help but feel a small measure of respect for, even if the goal of the operation was detrimental. She chalked this one up to the time she had been away. Certainly female business owners were more commonplace today than they had been in her time. There was no question this particular woman was doing others harm, though Medusa wasn’t entirely sure what websites were and how they impacted the world at large.

“She’s about to launch a new site,” Euryale added. “Aimed at exposing women in the business world for behaving like men. She has no shame, really. Her own company is ninety percent men. The women she hires are all in low level roles.”

“That is why I chose her to be next,” Stheno said. “Truthfully, she is further down my list, but the media will be gathering today for her announcement. If she suddenly turns to stone with reporters in the lobby it will be hard for anyone to cover this up.”

“They’ll notice us as well,” Medusa said with concern. She was already wary of her sisters’ plan. She was not prepared to have to defend herself again so soon after returning.

Stheno opened the glass door beside the stone sign. “We’ll be fine. I’ve got it all worked out.”

Medusa felt a chill as she passed over the threshold. It wasn’t the building’s cool air system, though that was a fascinating use of technology,

she had to admit. No. It was Stheno. There was something almost maniacal in her tone. It worried Medusa, even though she couldn't bring herself to say anything as they passed through the lobby where reporters were setting up their equipment.

The trio stepped into a rectangular box that Medusa now knew to be an elevator. It was the oddest sensation once the doors closed and she felt the device lifting her up through the building. Stranger still to see the doors open on an entirely different floor where workers—mostly men as Stheno had indicated—buzzed around the office. A woman in a white business suit stood at the center of the commotion barking orders.

"Bigger font!" the woman said as she shoved a paper back into the hands of one of her underlings. "I want the press release to shout out the news. Sixteen point. Minimum!"

Stheno turned to Medusa and smiled. "Now the fun begins." Stheno suddenly dropped her glamour. Her body turned from pink flesh to green scales. The snakes in her hair woke form their slumber as her grin turned from playful to sinister.

"Stheno!" Medusa whispered a horrified scream. "You said we weren't going to reveal ourselves."

Her grin grew wider, revealing her fangs. "Change of plans."

Euryale giggled as she shrugged and dropped her own glamour. "As I said, I kind of like this body."

Medusa was horrified by her sisters' sudden reveal. This was not part of the plan. She wanted to grab them as they stepped out of the elevator, but it was too late. A man in a uniform was the first to see them. His shock did not paralyze him though. It moved him to action. He pulled a projectile device from his waist. It was a gun.

Medusa had to protect her sisters. She couldn't let them be hurt. She'd seen just what guns could do in the images her sisters had provided.

The sunglasses were off in a moment, dropped to the floor as her glamour disappeared as well.

Right before the screaming started.

CHAPTER 14

The statue of Vaughn Ramsey stood in the living room of Prue's castle in the exact spot it had been in since Paige orbed it there. They'd pulled off the switch perfectly, even with the little hiccup of the replacement statue having a complete meltdown when Paige and Piper returned it to the park.

Phoebe was monitoring social media on her phone while Prue and Piper tried altering the potion they'd made. It looked like the viral marketing campaign angle was becoming the go-to explanation, taking on a life of its own. Videos posted online by witnesses in the park were spreading, but not with the fiery speed Phoebe had seen other buzzworthy posts getting picked up. It helped that most people were shrugging it off as a dumb campaign for an out-of-touch media mogul and choosing not to promote his network. Added bonus was that his competition was ignoring the lack of story as well.

"We're good so far," Phoebe said as she put away her phone. "Are you sure we need to get the dwarf, fairy, and leprechaun back?"

Prue held up a finger as she poured the latest attempt at the potion over the statue. They all waited, but Ramsey remained solid as a rock. Prue added the empty potion bottle to the pile. "I don't see any other option. I'm not even sure that will work."

"Besides, Paige is already getting them," Piper reminded her. "I doubt she'll be happy if she gets back here and we tell her we sent her off for nothing. We treat her like a magical cab enough as it is."

Prue circled the statue. “This is so strange. We’re at the Nexus of the All. You’d think magic would be even stronger here.”

“Certainly felt that way this morning,” Piper said. Prue didn’t seem to catch the concerned tone in her voice, but Phoebe couldn’t miss it. There was something weird about the magic this morning. Phoebe always felt a little odd here at the Nexus, but this was different.

“Something must have happened between then and now,” Phoebe said. “What if we try smashing it? Maybe he’s just inside a thin coating of stone.”

“And maybe we’ll break him into dozens of pieces that we can’t put back together again,” Prue said.

Phoebe shrugged, remembering the five-part investigative report his network had done on the hidden value of denying women certain medical services. “I don’t see the problem there.”

“Maybe whoever is doing this is getting stronger,” Piper suggested. “Learning from his mistakes.”

“Or *her* mistakes,” Prue added.

Phoebe was glad to see that Prue was onto her line of thought. “This is the second jackass we’ve had to rescue today. It’s possible that whoever is doing this isn’t just after powerful people. Maybe they are after powerful jackasses.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive,” Prue said.

“True,” Phoebe agreed. “But it could give us a clue. This might not be our typical demon. The congressman and this guy aren’t exactly innocents in the purest sense of the word. More like oppressive jerks that like to use their positions to tell other people how they should live. Could be we’re dealing with some witch gone rogue trying to teach them a lesson.”

“After spending a few minutes with the congressman this morning, I can relate,” Prue said. “But even so, no one should use magic for their own

purposes. We learned that message the hard way. We've still got to figure out what's going on and stop whoever is doing it."

Phoebe nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely. We must stop them. And then maybe give them a cookie." She smiled as both of her sisters gave her that very specific look that she received so many times throughout her childhood.

Thankfully, Paige arrived with the reinforcements before they could say anything about her lighthearted joke. Not for the first time, Phoebe thought of all the things her sisters had been cheated of not knowing about Paige when they were growing up. In this moment, the main thing Phoebe could focus on was the fact it would have been nice for someone else to be the baby of the family.

Then, she focused on the fact that they seemed to be missing someone. "Where's the leprechaun?" Phoebe asked.

Paige held up a small black pot filled with what appeared to be gold, but Phoebe knew from experience was something else. "Couldn't make it." Paige shook the pot. "But he sent along some luck for us. We'll make do with the dwarf and the fairy."

The fairy giggled as she tried to dip her toes in the golden magic. Paige waved her away like she was swatting a fly.

"The dwarf has a name," the shorter gentleman said as he leaned against his ax.

"We're sorry," Piper said. She was often the one that filled the role of apologizing for her family. "That was rude. We never have been formally introduced."

"Well, I already know who you all are," he replied, holding out a hand. "Name's Stein. Francis Stein."

Paige took it since she was closest. "Nice to meet you, Frankie. That's kind of a traditional name for a dwarf, isn't it?"

“Frank will be fine. Not all of us inspire cartoon characters,” he said as he sat on Prue’s couch. “Can’t tell you the fairy’s name and don’t think she’d want you to know. But I told you that spell wouldn’t work. You can’t just whip up essence of magical community. We’re not props you can use whenever you want to trot us out.”

Phoebe walked over to him. “Hmmm… seems like someone’s a bit--”

“Say ‘grumpy’ and you might just find the pointy end of my ax sticking out of your head.”

Phoebe stepped away from the dwarf. “Actually, I think I’ll go with psychotic sociopath.” The fairy laughed again, but Phoebe wasn’t sure if the tiny winged creature was laughing at what had been said or if she simply enjoyed threats of violence. Could go either way with fairies. In the magical community those little winged pests were really the closest to psychotic sociopaths, now that she thought about it.

Prue clapped her hands together like a kindergarten teacher, which told Phoebe that her sister was already learning how to deal with the magical community. “All right! The faster we do this, the faster you can get home. Up, up, up!”

Frank hopped off the couch and moved over to the statue of Vaughn Ramsey. “You sure you don’t want to keep him like this? Adds a touch of class to the joint.”

Prue sneered at the guy. “Positive. Now, if you don’t mind?”

He raised his ax. “Ready when you are.”

Prue nodded to the fairy, who flew over the statue’s head and sprinkled some pixie dust on it. Paige pulled a bit of luck from the small cauldron and threw it at Ramsey. Frank finished it off by swinging his ax where the media mogul would never want an ax to be swung.

It didn’t work.

“He’s still stone,” Piper said, stating the obvious.

Frank swung again, taking a small chip out of the statue's arm.

"Hey!" Prue yelled. "Careful there. We'd like to return him in one piece."

Paige held up another circle of golden magic. "Should we try it again?"

Phoebe's phone rang and she was thankful for the distraction. She glanced at the screen and decided it was a call she had to take. Without even bothering to interrupt the argument that was brewing between Prue and Frank, Phoebe started moving out of the room. "Hey, Elise. What's up?"

"You know how you asked me to keep that news about statues appearing out of nowhere off the radar?" her boss asked over the phone.

"It's on the radar now?" Phoebe guessed. She stopped short of the hallway.

"And how."

"I'm putting you on speaker." Phoebe turned back and pressed the speaker button on her phone and held it out for her sisters to hear. She ignored the annoyed glare that Frank threw her way.

"Another one of those statues turned up," Elise said. "Actually a dozen of them. And it wasn't in a park this time. It was in the offices of Carolyn Barnes."

"Carolyn Barnes?" Phoebe said. "Why do I know that name?"

"The Gorgon Gaze," Elise filled in the blank that immediately made things click in Phoebe's mind.

"That witch!" It was out of Phoebe's mouth before she realized what she was saying. She smiled an apology toward her sisters. "And I mean that in the most ignorant, stereotypical sense of the word."

"And here you're always teaching me about the subtle persecution of witches through modern slang," Elise said lightly over the phone.

Phoebe laughed, darkly. "Yeah, sometimes I break the rules myself. I try not to do it in front of the girls. But she really is a horrible person. You

don’t know the number of letters and emails I get from readers that refuse to acknowledge their husbands or boyfriends are even a little responsible for cheating on them. They quote that hateful anti-woman propaganda that Barnes spews like they’re cutting and pasting from one of her books.”

Prue chimed in, derailing Phoebe off before she went into full rant mode. “But back to the point, Elise. Someone got to her?”

“And some of her staff,” Elise said. “But that’s not the worst of it.”

Phoebe groaned. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“Just sent it to your phone.” As soon as it was out of Elise’s mouth, a video popped up in Phoebe’s text messages.

Phoebe ignored the dwarf’s continued grumbles as she motioned for her sisters to gather closer and pressed play. The video was jerky and hard to make out, but the screams on the audio were clear. About a dozen voices—mostly men—provided a soundtrack for the images of bodies running past the camera, jostling the person holding it. The video remained jerky as the screams subsided one-by-one.

The camera swung wildly, as the person holding it ran for the exit. The image alternated from in front of him to behind him as if the person filming couldn’t decide which was more important: escape or capturing the moment to go viral.

Viral must have won out as the camera paused when the owner reached the exit. He took one last shot at the forest of statues in the office. It was nearly impossible to see past the stone people, but Phoebe could make out three shapes that looked somewhat human, but not quite. They were green, with glowing eyes, and what looked to be snakes writhing on their heads.

Phoebe paused the video. The image wasn’t clear at all. It was nearly impossible to make anything out. And yet she was absolutely certain of what she was seeing. “Looks like we can put Medusa back on the list.”

“And her sisters,” Paige agreed. “Fitting they’d attack a website named for them. Probably want to collect on the money Barnes has made using their images.” Paige smiled wide, but the grin got weaker when she realized her sisters were staring at her. “What? It’s not like the woman didn’t deserve it.”

“Her employees don’t,” Piper said. “They’re just doing their job.”

“At a horrible website,” Phoebe said. “But that’s not the point. Is it, Elise?”

“No,” her boss’s voice came back through the phone. “Nobody knows what to make of this attack, but after the congressman’s statue appeared in the park and Vaughn Ramsey is still missing after *his* statue molted or whatever…”

All four sisters looked over at the statue. He wasn’t so much missing as he was indisposed.

“You can’t keep it quiet anymore,” Phoebe guessed.

“It’s news,” Elise said. “Weird, inexplicable news, but news. It’s gone up on every local news website in the last five minutes. No one knows what to make of this attack and I certainly won’t be sharing what I know just for page views, but if another big name disappears, it will go from human interest to lead story. This video is already viral.”

“I’m sure the guy who took it is so glad he can get some joy out of his coworkers’ being attacked,” Piper said.

“That was fast,” Phoebe said. “I was just looking for anything related to stone cold Vaughn Ramsey online.”

“Only a few sites have made the connection so far,” Elise said.

“Thanks for letting us know,” Phoebe replied. “Hopefully we’ll have something before it gets that far.”

“I’ll keep you posted from here,” Elise said as they ended the call.

Prue looked around her living room as Phoebe put away her phone. “Why do I have the feeling that my home is about to become a museum?”

Frank cleared his throat—excessively—like he had an actual frog in there he was trying to get out. “You know, we don’t have all day to stand around here. We haven’t even been offered a snack.”

Prue looked to Paige. “Can you get another pizza? I think my company might be here a while.”

“With bacon and anchovies,” the dwarf said. “I can’t speak for the fairy.”

The winged creature just giggled as was the way of fairies, but Paige had become well versed in translating their laughs. “I’ll get two,” she said as she orbed away.

That settled, Piper turned away from their guests to focus at the issue at hand. “This one’s going to be a bit harder to pull off. That building is going to have a ton of media attention thanks to that shaky video. To say nothing about the police that I’m sure are already investigating. I doubt Henry can do anything about that and I don’t need Paige here to tell us.”

“Yeah, but if the statues don’t disintegrate like the last one, people will be asking more questions,” Phoebe said. “We kind of screwed ourselves with that.”

“On the bright side it explains how the statue of the congressman disappeared out of that truck this morning,” Piper replied.

Phoebe shook her head. “That seems like so long ago.”

Prue waved her hand and the floor swallowed up the chair that was beside the statue of Vaughn Ramsey just before Frank was about to sit on it. The move earned her a “Hey! Watch it!”

Prue ignored him. “I’ve got all the room we need to store as many statues as we have to. But how are we going to stop this before I have to add a new wing to my house?”

“One thing at a time,” Piper said. “First we need to figure what Medusa and her sisters are up to.”

“Then we stop them,” Phoebe agreed.

CHAPTER 15

“This is almost as exciting as watching Prue assemble puzzles,” Cole said. They were into their second hour watching the most boring mortals on the face of the planet go about their humdrum lives.

“Give it time,” Coop replied. “Whatever’s going on, it’s been spreading fast enough that we should get some kind of clue soon. I’m sure something is going to happen to at least one of these couples before the day out.”

“Maybe we could force the issue,” Cole said. “Pick a couple and try to instigate a fight. That might call the attention of whoever is doing this.”

“I’d prefer not to do his work for him,” Coop said politely, but dismissively.

Cole shifted on the wicker couch. This was the most uncomfortable piece of furniture he’d ever spent time on. Coop didn’t look any cozier in his chair. It was no wonder that Leo slipped out to Magic School a few minutes ago. Cole would have to find an excuse to stretch his legs as soon as the former Whitelighter got back.

“We should have moved the sofa in here from the other room,” Coop said as he adjusted his position in the chair.

Cole nodded in agreement, but didn’t say anything. They’d already exhausted every topic of conversation he could come up with, from asking about Coop’s kids to the current organizational structure of the Cupid community. The latter was a subject he frankly didn’t care about at all. At least it kept them from discussing the white elephant in the room: the one thing they had in common.

It wasn’t that Cole was avoiding talking about Phoebe. He simply didn’t know a good way to broach the subject. He found his answer while watching the multiple couples onscreen—or on window. “She really seems to care about this job.”

“Phoebe?” Coop asked, as if there were any other option. “She loves it. And she’s good at it, too.”

Cole nodded. “A natural from the start.”

“That’s right,” Coop said. “You were there when she got it.”

“More or less,” Cole said. “I wasn’t always myself in those days.”

Coop shifted in his chair, but didn’t add anything. Probably too polite to bring up the whole sordid time when Cole was infected with the Source. Back then, he’d been trying to trap Phoebe into marriage and giving birth to his demon child. Cole wondered how much about their past Coop knew about. Probably all of it. It didn’t exactly make for casual conversation. They should probably just stick to the weather.

An uncomfortable silence fell on the room as neither man knew what to say. Thankfully, they were saved by Leo’s return.

“The kids are taken care of.” Leo paused to take in the awkward way Cole and Coop were sitting before moving on as if he didn’t notice. “Bailey’s going to stick around to keep an eye on them until we can get them home.”

Coop sat up straight. “That’s one brave librarian.”

Leo smiled. “Henry’s going to join her once he gets off work. The two of them should be able to handle eight kids.”

“I wouldn’t be able to do it,” Cole said.

“It happens more often than you’d think,” Leo said. “The entire staff at Magic School pitches in, watching the kids when we’ve got something going on. Most of them are more than happy to support the Charmed Ones.”

Cole nodded, but that wasn't really what he'd been talking about. He managed fine when the entire family came for their visits to Prue. Mostly kept to himself. He wasn't one to let small children climb all over him. He had no intention of offering up babysitting services to any of the sisters like the staff at Magic School seemed to do. But none of those things were foremost on his mind at the moment.

If the past had played out differently, this would have been his life. If the child Phoebe carried while he was the Source of All Evil had survived and been born a witch instead of the heir to the Source, things might have been different. Cole might have found a way to change for that child. To be the man he was trying to be today. But then what? Popping out a brood of little ones while he worked at some legitimate law office? He'd tried working at a normal mortal job. It was boring.

But would Phoebe be the woman she was today if he'd stayed? Cole knew it was over between them, but he couldn't help wondering about the might-have-beens. It was odd since he wasn't normally one who dwelled on the past. But with very little to entertain him on the Nexus of the All, it seemed that dwelling was his number one way to pass the time. It wasn't any different at the Manor watching the most boring type of reality television ever made: actually reality.

Coop sat up suddenly, leaning forward, and pointed to the window second from the end of the row. "Looks like we got something. How do we turn up the volume on this thing?"

Cole motioned to Coop as he got up and moved to the window along with Leo. "Your magic activated it, so you control it. Just concentrate."

Coop joined them by the glass wall, raising his ring to the image of two women who looked to be in the middle of a raging argument. It caught Cole off guard, because a moment earlier they had been sitting quietly, one quietly reading while the other was working on her tablet. Their legs had

been curled together in that casual romantic way that two people who have been in a relationship for a time just seem to fit. If Cole's thoughts hadn't been on himself, he might have noticed what had set them off, but he was fairly certain he hadn't missed anything.

Cole tried reading their lips as Coop's ring glowed brightly, connecting with the image until they had sound.

"Your mother has never treated me like part of the family!" the taller, light-haired woman screamed, echoing through the Manor loud enough to alert the nosey neighbor next door.

"Turn it down!" Leo yelled with an eye out one of the unobstructed windows.

Coop cringed as he waved his hand over the window, running from top to bottom as the volume decreased to a more manageable level. "Sorry."

"Don't even get me started on the way your brother talks to when he's had a bit too much at every single family gathering!" the other woman replied, her dark hair whipping around as she gestured wildly.

"And your father!" the blonde said. "That time at the restaurant!"

"*That* one you totally deserved," her wife shot back.

The blonde breathed deeply, glaring at her wife before turning and storming out of the house. "I want a divorce!"

Cole and the guys watched as the brunette shrugged and walked calmly to the bedroom. Now that her wife was gone, she seemed perfectly fine. She wasn't huffing or talking to herself, cursing her other half for leaving in the middle of a fight. Not even reacting to what her wife had said.

She calmly grabbed a suitcase from the closet and filled it with clothes. She didn't seem angry anymore or even sad. If anything, she was simply resigned. It was almost as if she were simply packing for a business trip. Cole would have imagined someone else in her position throwing clothes into the bag while mumbling curses in her wife's direction. This woman

was even taking the time to carefully refold her clothes so they didn't wrinkle.

"What happened?" Leo asked. "Did you guys see anything?"

"Let me try to rewind this to catch what we might have missed," Coop said. "Now that I've got a handle on this magic, it works pretty much like my own power. Just magnified by the number of windows available."

Coop focused on the image again, willing it to go back to the beginning. After a moment, the picture froze with the suddenly calm woman about to put a stack of clothes into the suitcase. She took two steps backwards and returned the clothes to the drawer she'd taken them from. The image sped up as she returned the rest of her clothing to the bureau and backed out of the room.

Coop rewound through the fight back to the point the pair was simply sitting in their living room with legs casually intertwined. Cole had been correct in his assessment. They looked perfectly content quietly together until the moment the darker haired woman slammed her book down on the table.

"I can't do this anymore," she said. "I can't pretend that we don't have a problem."

"A problem?" the other woman said, putting down her tablet and matching her wife in tone and volume. "All we *have* are problems. Ever since that stupid mass marriage in the park just because you didn't want our families there."

"*I* didn't want out families there?" the brunette said as she stood. "I'm pretty sure you were the one that made that decision. You were certainly the one that wrote in to that stupid advice columnist!"

The blonde popped up off the couch, gesturing wildly. "Can you blame me? I mean your parents have always hated me! Your mother has never treated me like part of the family!"

“That was sudden,” Leo said as they reached the point they had tuned in to the argument.

“And a weak reason to end a marriage,” Cole added. Few couples experienced the level of intensity he’d had in his own past relationships, so it was hard for him to take the everyday little dramas seriously. When loving too much could literally be the difference between life and death, it was hard to consider something as commonplace as parental disapproval as being insurmountable. His own father had married an upper-level demon that ultimately took his life. *That* was a problem that couldn’t be handled in a few sessions of marriage counseling.

But if the shadow crossing the window was any indication, this fight wasn’t entirely theirs to begin with. Cole pointed to the spot that caused his concern. “Looks like they had help.”

Leo and Coop leaned in along with Cole, but it was impossible to make out anything from their vantage point. “Looks like a man,” Leo said. “Though I guess it could be a demon or any other humanoid-type being.”

“I can help with that,” Coop said. He placed a hand on Leo and Cole’s shoulders and beamed them out of the Manor. They appeared in the couple’s yard a moment later. A pair of windows looked into the room and they did their best to stay out of sight so the brunette didn’t suddenly catch a trio of trespassers in her yard as she continued to pack.

“This is the right window,” Cole said as he got his bearings. It was always odd when someone else teleported him. He preferred to use his own powers to get from one place to the next. Cole pushed the concern from his mind as he pointed to a flowerbed beneath the window on the right. Someone had trampled the flowers in that spot.

“I’d call that confirmation,” Leo said. “Someone is trying to undo Phoebe’s work. But why? She didn’t use her magic to marry these couples. She was working her day job.”

“Let’s see what the evidence can tell us.” Coop picked up a few smashed petals and held them up to his ring, bathing them in the pink glow of his magic.

“That really is an all-purpose ring,” Cole said with a smirk.

Coop smiled. “It gets the job done.” He closed his eyes and focused his concentration while Cole and Leo watched. “I’m sensing a presence,” Coop said. “It’s a dark presence. Full of hate. Full of anger. It’s someone… it’s someone I recognize.” Coop opened his eyes. “I know who did this. But he’s not going after Phoebe. I’m the one he wants to get back at. This is all because of me.”

CHAPTER 16

“Where are we? What have you done?” Medusa demanded as she and her sisters materialized in a lavish bedroom with the kind of comforts she’d never imagined in her previous life. They had all resumed using their glamours the moment they left the scene of the attack. A glance out the window confirmed that the orange-red bridge that crossed the great expanse of water was still in view. They remained in the city of San Francisco. That was upsetting. She’d hoped that her sisters would have had the sense to take her far away from what had just happened.

The way they were being so free with their powers was another concern to add to the list. Typically, Medusa and her sisters only teleported over great distances, like taking them back to their homeland. Since they’d been cursed as gorgons, it now took a lot of energy for them to dematerialize in one place and rematerialize in another. The fact that they were beginning to use this ability freely meant that they were growing stronger. If Medusa didn’t find a way to talk them out of their plans soon, she wouldn’t be able to stop them later.

Stheno ignored her sister’s questions as she picked up a small black device on the table and aimed it at the dark screen of what Medusa believed was a television, turning it on. Stheno continued to aim the device at the television and the image changed to a conservatively dressed woman with perfectly sculpted blonde hair staring directly out of the screen at them.

At first Medusa thought it was one of those video conferencing systems that allowed people to communicate face-to-face over a distance, but she

quickly realized the explanation was simpler than that. It was a news report on a twenty-four hour network. She didn't know if the channel belonged to the man they had turned to stone earlier, but she suspected that it was his. Stheno would probably want to keep tabs on what happened with him as well.

Medusa's eyes went wide behind her sunglasses as the image onscreen switched to a video recording of the offices of the Gorgon Gaze. Someone had filmed their encounter. A flash of their bodies could be seen among the statues and fleeing men. Thankfully, it wasn't clear that they were in the act of turning people to stone. Even better, unless one knew what they were looking at, it wouldn't even make any sense to the casual observer.

Eyewitness accounts came next. A reporter on the street was interviewing people who claimed to be inside the building at the time of the incident. The stories these supposed witnesses were sharing hardly matched the reality of what had occurred. Medusa couldn't be sure if their fears had heightened their reactions or they were just making things up. The news anchor must have assumed the latter as she could barely keep a straight face as the camera came back on her.

"That's it? That's all they got? We came out of hiding for that?" Stheno raged as the anchor moved on to a story that Medusa didn't begin to understand. It seemed to be a report about a baby singing in the backseat of a car. This is what constituted news in this era?

"They didn't even get my good side," Euryale said as she draped herself over the overstuffed white couch. "Or maybe they did. It's so hard to tell on that shaky video."

"I thought we came out of hiding to fight for the oppressed," Medusa countered. "Not become celebrities."

Stheno gave her sister the same glare she'd cultivated as a child when she was annoyed that Medusa was acting her younger age. "That's the only

way to make change in this modern world," Stheno said. "Through celebrity. It's all about going viral. Once we get the people talking, we can effect change."

Stheno pointed to the baby onscreen that was now dancing in her car seat along with the signing. Not for the first time, Medusa was completely clueless as to what was going on.

"That way also brings out the torches and iron scythes as well," Medusa reminded her sister. "Or have you forgotten what that first week was like after Athena cursed us? Before we went into hiding and perfected our glamours. When the locals came after us? I don't intend to go through that again. Not in this time. The weapons of humanity are much more dangerous now."

Medusa had no desire to go through what she'd experienced back when the curse had taken hold of her. Neighbors and friends had turned on her and her sisters without question. People they had known their entire lives wanted to destroy them. The same innocent beings they had once used their powers to help suddenly feared the magic they possessed.

It wasn't that Medusa had entirely blamed them. Before she and her sisters had the strength to create their glamour, they had taken on the appearance of terrifying monsters.

"Let me see your eyes," Stheno said as she moved toward Medusa, reaching for her sunglasses.

Medusa held out a hand to stop her. "I can do it." She didn't want Stheno to derail her from the conversation, but her own curiosity had overwhelmed her. Medusa removed her sunglasses and leaned toward her sister. "How does it look?"

"Don't blink," Stheno said.

"Don't blink?" Euryale repeated. "I can see it from here. The eyes are still windows into her monstrous soul."

Stheno sighed. “She’s not powerful enough yet that we can break the binds of this city and move out into the world at large. We still need to rely on the magic we have been using to fuel us.”

Medusa was torn. She wanted to be free to use the full force of her gorgon powers again, if only so that she could work up her full glamour. Being a gorgon was still nothing compared to the magic she’d had before she was cursed, but the ability to blend in with the rest of humans was priceless.

On the other hand, once her power was at its strongest, her sisters would be affected as well. They wouldn’t need to be tied to the magic of this place or the limited power Medusa possessed. When they turned people to stone it would be permanent, not so easily undone as before. As long as they needed her, she could control them to a degree. Not that she was the one doing the controlling at the moment.

Once Stheno didn’t need her any longer, Medusa worried about what her sister would unleash with her gorgon power to turn people permanently to stone on her own. Where would she stop? *Would* she stop? Medusa had to find a way to break Stheno’s hold over her before it became too late.

As Stheno stepped away, Medusa flipped her sunglasses around so she could see her reflection in the lenses. It was no use. The glass was too dark to give her a proper image.

“Here.” Euryale reached out from the couch and handed her a cellular phone for some reason. Medusa only understood why when she saw her image on the screen. The device had some odd kind of mirroring technology. It took Medusa a moment to search her newly implanted memories to realize it was a camera meant for capturing images for posterity.

Her sisters were right, of course. Not that there was any logical reason for them to lie to her. Medusa’s eyes still had not changed. They still bore

the look of the serpents that she wore. It was the one part of her true form that her glamour could not hide. At least, not until she was at full strength again. Not that it mattered if Stheno kept revealing their monstrous side to the world.

Medusa put the glasses back over her eyes. She didn't need to hide them from her sisters, but she felt more comfortable when she knew they weren't visible to anyone. Herself, most of all. She hated catching even a glimpse of them in a reflection. She despised what Athena had done to her.

"What is your goal?" she asked Stheno.

"Goal?" Stheno's innocent act was always her worst trait. It was mainly for show since it wasn't remotely convincing. That was by design. It was her way of letting Medusa know she didn't really care for her youngest sister's opinion on important matters.

"How does this end?" Medusa clarified. "When do you stop? When you have turned every human in this world to stone? When the entire planet is hunting for us monsters? What is the purpose of this plan that has us appearing on the news and going viral or whatever it is you were talking about?"

Stheno considered Medusa's question. Once again, it was all a show. She had the answer to whatever Medusa could ask, long before it formed it in her mind. She waited patiently for Stheno to deem herself ready to respond.

"Fear."

"Fear?"

"It's a great motivator," Stheno said. "Inspire the proper amount of fear and people will do exactly what you want them to do. Too much and they will attack you. Too little and they will ignore you. But the proper amount is just enough to motivate them to listen to what you have to say."

"And then you'll what? Change the world?" Medusa asked.

Stheno smiled. “Something like that.”

“And you think no one is going to try to stop you?”

“Oh, someone will definitely try to stop us,” Stheno said. “Three someones. Well, four now, I guess. But I’ve got something else going on that will keep them preoccupied for a while. At least long enough to get a better video of us doing our work out there.”

Medusa closed her eyes behind her sunglasses. “I assume you don’t intend to tell me that part of your plan either.”

Stheno smiled and remained infuriatingly silent.

“I’m so over Greek mythology,” Paige said as she bit into her second pizza of the day. “I mean, Medusa? Really? What could she possibly want now?”

“Seems to me her agenda’s pretty clear,” Phoebe said. “Her victims aren’t exactly shining examples of progressive thought.”

Piper and Prue glared at their sister. “You really need to sound less impressed,” Piper said. “And more… ‘Protector of the Innocents.’”

Phoebe shrugged. “I call ’em like I see ’em.”

Paige put down her slice of pizza. “Well, I see it this way. We have an ancient evil turning people to stone. *Three* ancient evils, actually. Everything I learned in school taught me that Medusa was some badass monster who attacked anyone that came into view. Just because these first victims weren’t the most innocent of Innocents doesn’t mean she’ll stop there. No big deal. We’ve taken on our fair share of monsters. This one’s no different.”

“Ha!” Frank spat… literally. Bits of pizza flew from his mouth.

“What?” Paige handed him a napkin. “And ew.”

“Nothing,” he replied as he wiped his mouth, leaving the bits of sprayed pizza out on the table where they were.

The sisters stared at him for a moment, waiting for more, but he just continued munching on his slice. Piper was the first to move on, turning to Paige. “Why don’t you orb up to the Elders and see if they can tell us about more about Medusa and her sisters.”

“Do I have to?” Paige asked, semi-seriously. She’d never been a big fan of the group that ruled the upper regions, despite the fact that they had recently undergone some changes in policy and she had some friends on the Council now.

“The Elders might know more. I’d call Leo, but he’s dealing with Phoebe’s problem and I don’t want him to stretch himself too thin.” Piper said. “Besides, the Elders were the ones that dealt directly with the Titans. These gorgons are all part of the same time period. Roughly.”

“Very roughly,” Frank mumbled from the table.

Phoebe rolled her eyes but otherwise ignored him. “We’ll take anything we can get. I don’t even know the names of the other two. Anyone?”

Prue, Piper, and Paige just looked at one another. “I don’t even remember ever hearing about other sisters until Leo mentioned them earlier,” Paige admitted.

“Oh, come on!”

Four heads whipped around to glare at the dwarf. Four voices snapped at once: “What?”

Frank dropped his pizza crust in the box as the fairy giggled above him. “Oh, nothing really. I’m just a little surprised that the Charmed Ones rely on gossip and rumors to fight evil. It’s really impressive you’ve done as well as you have with such poor research skills.”

Paige let out an exasperated huff and Prue practically had to hold her back. It was easier for the sister that had the least experience with the magical community to keep her cool. Paige stepped back while she let Prue take over.

Prue kept it simple as she glared as the dwarf. “Enlighten us.”

“First of all, the Titans predate the gorgons,” he replied. “By like a century or so. Once the Greek gods did their job and destroyed them, those doofuses stuck around to wreak their own havoc. Your Elders were useless in stopping the power mad gods and goddesses they created. Completely turned their backs on the nightmares they had unleashed on the world until it got to the point they had to step in and do something about it.”

“Sounds like the Elders,” Paige said. “But what’s that got to do with the gorgons?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “And everything. You’ve got to take all that you know about Greek mythology with a grain of salt. Most of those stories are about image rehabilitation, primarily for the Elders. History is written by the ones that get to tell their stories.”

“So what we know about Medusa isn’t true?” Piper asked.

Frank laughed. “Seems to me like you don’t know anything about Medusa and her sisters: *Stheno* and *Euryale*. But even if you did know the common myth that survived for thousands of years, you’d still only have part of the story.”

“And this is something that dwarves just happen to be experts in?” Piper asked.

“Dwarfs,” he corrected. “And dwarfs with a doctorate in Greek mythology tend to know a bit more than the average human.”

“Wait,” Phoebe said. “You have a doctorate. So you’re Dr. Frank Stein? Please tell me your middle name begins with an ‘N’.”

The dwarf glared at her now. “X, actually. You have a problem with that?”

Phoebe smiled and shook her head. “Nooooo. No problem at all. Although if I were you I wouldn’t be so snippy when someone wanted to call me grumpy instead.”

Frank stuck his tongue out at her. “May I continue?”

“By all means,” Phoebe said.

He cleared his throat. “Once upon a time--”

“Seriously?” Paige said.

“You tell your stories the way you want. I’ll tell my stories the way I want. May I continue?”

Paige waved a hand for him to hurry it along.

“Once upon a time, there lived three sisters. The most powerful witches of their time.”

“*All* time,” Phoebe corrected. “We’re the most powerful witches of *all* time. Talk about getting your facts straight.”

Frank sneered at her. “Who said I was talking about you?”

“The gorgons are witches?” Prue asked.

“Witches first,” he said. “Gorgons later.”

Paige and her sisters took seats on the couch, careful not to crush the fairy that had perched herself on the armrest. Prue had to widen it slightly with her magic so they could all fit. It seemed like this story might take a while.

“As you already know, the oh-so-wise Council of Elders gifted mortals with the powers of gods so they could take on the Titans. And as you also know, mortals went a little crazy with power. Ruled—and tortured—the ancient Greeks for years and years. Toward the end of their reign Medusa and her sisters were up-and-coming witches. And since the Elders rarely deal directly with their messes, the sisters were sent to Greece to check out what was happening when things finally got out of hand. See if they could work some magic to do some good. Half those stories you hear about heroes rescuing people from the Nemean lion or killing the Minotaur? That was really Medusa, Stheno, and Euryale. But since they worked their magic in secret, some random dudes took all the credit.”

“How come no one knows about this?” Paige asked.

“How many mortals know about the work you do?” Frank replied.

“More than I’m comfortable with sometimes,” Piper said. “But we get your point.”

“I thought you might,” he said. “Remember the time period. Not only were witches in hiding, but women as heroes? That didn’t go over so well with many of the storytellers. Medusa didn’t care. She wasn’t in it for the glory, unlike her sisters, so the Elders balanced out the sisters’ powers with their desires. Medusa was the most powerful by far, but she had a mortal lifespan. Stheno and Euryale were immortal, but weaker on their own.”

“Why?” Paige asked.

Frank shrugged. “Why do the Elders do anything? But this is where the legend meshes with reality. While they were checking on the Gods, Medusa fell for Poseidon, which was kind of against the rules. Witches falling for Whitelighters or Cupids is one thing, but witches falling for the Elders’ magical screw ups was quite another.”

“Did Poseidon love her too?” Paige asked.

“You think I have access to Poseidon’s diary?” Frank asked. “Who can tell? It was over two thousand years ago. But that’s not the point. Whether he loved her or not, the one thing everyone agrees on is that he forced himself on Medusa. Raping and pillaging was nothing new to these Gods. They constantly forced themselves on the powerless, taking what they wanted through magic or sex. As powerful as Medusa was, she couldn’t stop him.”

Paige shook her head in disgust. “You hear these stories in school and you think they’re just crappy legends. But then you realize they really happened to people.”

“It gets worse,” Frank said. “The rape occurred in the temple of *Athena*. And the Goddess of War was pissed that her temple was defiled.”

“I’m guessing she unleashed a big can of whupass on Poseidon for that,” Paige said. She’d briefly inherited the abilities of that particular goddess when the Charmed Ones had taken on the escaped Titans. She still remembered the rage she had felt tied to that magic. When she imagined it directed Poseidon’s way it made her smile, though it was a smile tinged with regret.

“You’d guess wrong,” Frank said. “One god would never blame another god for the things their power made them do. No. Medusa bore the brunt of Athena’s anger.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Paige felt angrier about it due to her connection to Athena. “She blamed Medusa for her assault? She attacked the victim?”

Frank nodded. “And that’s when Athena cursed her into becoming a gorgon. It was motivated by rage, but it served a greater purpose as well. It was her way of fighting back against the Elders. Took out some of their servants. The witches. Medusa still had magic as a gorgon, but she was incredibly weaker.”

“So she was victimized, victim-blamed, and finally used as a pawn in a battle that she didn’t start?” Paige asked, growing more disgusted by the moment.

“Pretty much,” Frank replied. “Athena turned her into a gorgon so that no one would ever want to look upon her. The added bonus was that it sent a message to Athena’s enemies not to mess with her, or else she’d turn them into something even more hideous.”

“I’m starting to understand why Medusa wanted to turn people to stone,” Phoebe added.

“But I’m not understanding why Athena would give her *any* power,” Paige said. She’d only shared Athena’s powers for a brief time several years ago, but the one thing Paige took from the experience was that the Goddess

of War was a first and foremost a strategic tactician. Punishing Medusa while still allowing her to do anything like turn people to stone seemed off.

“That was an unintended consequence,” Frank said, clearing up Paige’s confusion. “Medusa was only supposed to be a horrible monster, striking fear in any man that looked upon her. But Medusa’s magic was twisted in the curse, which is how she came to turn people to stone when they upset her.”

“It doesn’t automatically happen to everyone who lays eyes on her?” Prue clarified.

“Athena started that rumor,” Frank said. “No. Medusa could control the power to some degree. She could do other basic magic too. Teleportation. Pretty good with glamours after a while. But she was nowhere near as powerful as she used to be. Not that it mattered to Athena. The fact that Medusa still possessed magic enraged Athena. That’s when she sent Perseus after the gorgon to end her life. That’s probably the story you’re familiar with. He used her reflection to turn her to stone. Cut off her head and put it on his shield, which he gave to Athena because he was a little suck up. Blah, blah, blah, the end.”

“And Medusa’s sisters?” Prue asked.

“They went after Athena, of course. No one is really sure if it was done out of love or the fact that their own magic was diminished while their sister was under the curse. Of course, with their weaker magic, it was easy pickings for Athena to curse them as well. It took a few years before Perseus could track down Medusa. In the meantime, the gorgons turned more than a few people into stone. Mostly because they were trying to defend themselves. Believe it or not, the people of ancient Greece got a little crazy when there were monsters in their midst. Or anyone that would qualify as a little different.”

“Not much has changed,” Paige said, though she had trouble considering green, scaled creatures with snakes for hair as qualifying as a “little” different. Still, she was having a problem with the idea of calling them monsters after knowing a bit more about what they’d gone through. It wasn’t entirely different from some of the situations she and her sisters had found themselves in at times, considering how often they’d been used as other people’s pawns. Thankfully, they had never experienced the horror of a sexual assault like Medusa had gone through. “Anyone else suddenly rooting for the gorgons?”

“No,” Prue said, definitively. “I get that what they were put through was horrible. I don’t blame them for being angry at the gods or Elders or so-called heroes that did those things to them. Hell, I’d want vengeance too. But that was over two thousand years ago. From what you’ve told me, the gods are gone. These people they’re turning to stone sound like jerks, but they certainly didn’t have anything to do with Athena’s curse. The gorgons have to be stopped.”

“I’m not going to vanquish them,” Paige said, with just as much conviction as her eldest sister. “They’ve been punished enough.”

“I don’t even know if we can vanquish them,” Phoebe chimed in. “They’re not demons. Not witches either, now.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Piper said. “If they can be reasoned with, we’ll talk to them. But if they need to be dealt with more forcibly, we can do that too. Much as I’d love to use my magic on anyone who ever annoyed me, there are rules about these things.” Piper turned back to Frank. “The only thing about all this that confuses me is that Leo said that Medusa’s supposed to be dead. How do you explain that?”

The dwarf simply pointed to Prue and then grabbed another piece of pizza. Apparently, story time was over. Paige was about to ask if he had any

more information at his disposal when Phoebe’s pop song ring tone went off and Piper’s phone rang at the same moment.

Paige suspected that things were about to get a lot worse.

CHAPTER 17

Piper didn't waste a second, bursting through the front door to Halliwell's the moment Paige had orbed them to the restaurant. The hostess on duty hadn't made much sense over the phone, but it was clear there was some sort of emergency. Nicolette wasn't prone to hysteria. Something big had to be up for her to use such a frantic tone at a volume that everyone around Piper could hear her through their connection.

Part of the challenge was the dueling noise from Phoebe's phone as Mika's voice emerged with similar volume and urgency. Neither call ended well, with both sisters grabbing Paige and telling Prue they'd be right back. Paige stopped off first at the *Bay Mirror* to drop off Phoebe, figuring she might be able to assist with Piper's problem since she often helped out at the restaurant. One step inside the dining room and it was clear to Piper that she was going to need all the help she could get.

The scene inside was like something out of one of those disaster films where the world's population is struck with some kind of global pandemic. Halliwell's was apparently ground zero. Piper was expecting the beginning of a zombie attack any minute.

Patrons were doubled over in their chairs and even on the floor looking various shades of green. One man was rolling around on a table in what Piper hoped was a melodramatic act. A couple of members of the wait staff were similarly ill while the hostess and bartender seemed frozen, wondering what to do. Piper worried that the kitchen staff was in similar shape since

any other time Chef would have been the first one out there making sure their guests were okay.

Nicolette broke out of her shock and came running over with cell phone in hand the moment she saw her boss walk through the door. “Piper! Paige! I’m on with 911. This is crazy.”

Piper looked at the phone and then to her sister. “It’s okay, Nicolette. We’re here. Paige could you take over with the operator while Nicolette fills me in on what’s going on?”

“Absolutely.” Paige held out a hand and took the phone from the hostess. As Piper walked off with the young woman she did her best to listen in as Paige got on the call. It was difficult since her sister lowered her voice so no one else could overhear. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “This was a complete overreaction to a little tummy ache. Everything is fine here. We don’t need any ambulances.”

It took a little bit to convince the operator that Nicolette had been overreacting, and Piper assumed Paige was getting the lecture about wasting resources by calling emergency services for nothing. Piper had gotten that same lecture herself after Wyatt’s multiple calls to the hotline over the years. Piper had taught him to use the number if there was ever an emergency. It wasn’t the child’s fault that the Manor was struck by an emergency on a weekly basis sometimes.

Piper was still working to calm Nicolette as Paige got off the phone. She just hoped calling off the ambulances was the right thing to do. They were only guessing that this was some kind of magical malady. If they were wrong, they could be putting the lives of her customers at risk. But Piper was having a hard time imagining anything in her kitchen causing this kind of reaction, and she motioned for the bartender to pour a glass of water. Jessup seemed equally stunned from his spot behind the bar as he handed over the glass without a word.

Nicolette took a heaping gulp of water and followed it up with a deep breath. “I’m so sorry, Piper. They just overwhelmed me. It was just one or two people at first. They started feeling a little funny and then—BOOM—it hit everyone.”

A woman in a black dress and cartoonishly bulky costume jewelry forced her way into the conversation “Are you the manager here?”

“I’m the owner,” Piper said with her brightest smile.

The woman huffed, obviously not caring about semantics as she waved her hand toward a man doubled over in his chair at the nearest table. “What did your food do to my husband? Is he dying?”

“We’re trying to find out, ma’am,” Piper said. “I just got here, but I will let you know the moment we figure this out.”

“I’m going to sue,” the woman said as she whipped out her cell phone. “I am going to own this building and everything you have ever bought in your life! Do you have a house? A car? Well, it’s mine now.”

Piper threw up her hands a moment before the woman could press the screen of her phone. Piper’s magic stopped the call from happening, along with everything else around her. The dining room became a frozen tableau of people in pain. “This is going to destroy me.” She immediately hated herself for thinking of her own problem before her suffering customers, but it was the first thing that popped into her mind once the moaning stopped.

“We don’t know it’s the food,” Paige said. “Not unless everyone in the restaurant ordered the same exact thing.”

For the first time, Piper got a good look at her surroundings. It seemed like every customer was showing signs of some degree of suffering. A quick check of the tables revealed different menu items on the tables in various stages of being eaten. It wasn’t like everything had come out of the kitchen at the same time. The woman that had accosted her only had a small garden salad, which barely looked to be touched.

“Think you can heal them while they’re frozen, Paige?” Piper went to the door and locked it, flipping the sign from OPEN to CLOSED. The last thing she needed was someone walking in on this pretty picture.

“I don’t know that I can heal them at all,” Paige said. “But it’s worth a try.”

Piper crossed the dining room and peeked through the window in the door to the kitchen. The four members of the kitchen staff were all curled on the floor, writhing in pain. Piper was a stickler for keeping the kitchen clean, so it wasn’t as disgusting as some kitchens she’d worked in over her life, but it still hurt her to see her employees in such pain. She raised her hands and froze them as well. “The kitchen staff’s in the same shape. Let’s start in there and then you can do the rest while I talk to Chef and figure out what went wrong.”

“On it,” Paige said as Piper held the door open for her. Paige started with the chef, focusing her healing power on the woman’s stomach, which she was cradling. A golden glow emitted from Paige’s hands as she reached out for the malady and tried to fix it. With the woman being frozen, Piper imagined it was a bit more challenging than usual since Paige couldn’t be sure exactly what was wrong or even when to stop what she was doing if the magic worked.

At the point Paige felt like she’d done all she could, she turned off her healing power and moved on to the rest. It only took a couple of minutes for her to work through the entire crew. Once she was done, Piper helped her up off the floor. “Thanks. Now, go take care of the dining room. I’ll unfreeze everyone in here and make sure they don’t leave. Maybe they can give me some kind of clue what was going on.”

Piper watched her sister leave to work her magic. As soon as the kitchen door stopped swinging, she held up her hands and turned off her power, being sure to limit her range to the immediate area. Paige’s healing spell

must have worked, because the kitchen staff looked confused as they were unfrozen, but they did not seem to be in pain any longer.

Piper helped her chef off the floor as the others got up on their own. “Are you okay, Suzanne?”

“Much better,” the chef replied. “I think I might have passed out for a moment. I don’t remember you coming in.”

“Have a seat,” Piper pulled a stool over before helping her other employees to their feet. “All of you, sit down and don’t go anywhere for the moment.”

“What about the customers?” Suzanne asked.

“Paige is with them,” Piper assured her. “I think they’re going to be okay. It seems to be passing. Can you tell me what happened?”

Suzanne shook off the haze of her recovery. “It was the strangest thing. Cary was the first to mention something was wrong. He’s pulling a double so he took his dinner break before the rush and I made him the risotto. He started getting a bit woozy while waiting on his tables. Nothing serious at first. Certainly nothing that made me think anything was wrong. Then it was like all the color suddenly drained from his face and I swear he started speaking in tongues. Eventually he couldn’t speak at all. He was just moaning and clutching his stomach. Pretty soon it spread to the customers. And, well, us in here.”

“They didn’t all have the risotto,” Piper said.

“That’s the thing,” Suzanne said. “Hardly anyone ordered it. I was the only one in here that even tasted it.”

“You tested it?” Piper asked.

“While I was preparing it earlier,” Suzanne replied. “Not after I thought something was wrong.” She handed Piper some printed receipts. “Before I got hit, I pulled all the orders of people who were getting sick.”

“It’s spread across the entire menu,” Piper said as she reviewed the orders. It confirmed what she’d already seen on the tables.

“Some of those meals don’t share any ingredients,” Suzanne pointed out. “Not even spices.”

“No,” Piper agreed. As the chef who had initially come up with most of the recipes on the menu, Piper knew each dish intimately. “So maybe it’s not food related?”

“You think something’s in the air?” Suzanne suggested. “In the water?”

Piper’s head hurt. “I think we’re going to have to shut down while I figure this out.”

Piper spent the rest of the night dealing with irate customers. It was understandable. They thought her restaurant had made them sick. She couldn’t exactly explain that they were victims of magic of unknown origin. Then again, the fact that they had been made ill in what was very likely some kind of attack on Piper probably wouldn’t have eased their anger.

Paige had been able to heal everyone but they weren’t exactly thrilled to be so violently ill even for a brief time. It took all of Piper’s natural powers of persuasion to keep them from writing bad reviews or contacting anyone official to complain. Thankfully the husband of the woman with the costume jewelry had convinced her not to complete her call to the lawyer.

Several times Piper had to rely on her supernatural powers as well to freeze the room just so she had a moment to calm herself. It was better than using the other aspect of her power to blow them all up.

In the end, it had cost the restaurant several free meals in the future and a promise that any medical bills would be covered if anyone still wanted to go to the hospital and that she would be closed for the rest of the night. She didn’t bother to say that she might have to be closed longer than that. It wasn’t like she could open her doors again when she didn’t know what had

caused the problem in the first place. That would take some work of a different kind.

Once everyone was gone, Piper and Paige bagged up several of the uneaten meals and orbed to the attic of the Manor. It was going to take all their magical resources to figure out what was going on.

CHAPTER 18

“You really don’t think newspapers are an antiquated way of delivering important information to the masses?” The obnoxious and condescending voice coming through the phone made Phoebe want to reach through the line and strangle the man on the other side. She made do by throttling the receiver of the office phone as she glared daggers at Mika, who was sitting across from her.

Phoebe took a deep breath and forced a smile, hoping it would make her sound more pleasant in her response. “I believe what I said was, I’m not here to comment on the state of the newspaper industry. I agreed to this interview to discuss your series of blog posts attacking… I mean *reviewing* my column.”

Truthfully, Phoebe hadn’t agreed to anything. Mika had set this whole thing up with Elise’s blessing. While Phoebe had been dealing with gorgons and statues, the blogger that had hooked into her story managed to get an interview with one of the couples that had broken up. He’d interviewed the pair at the same time and, in their anger, they were willing to agree with anything the blogger suggested. Phoebe had gotten the brunt of the blame even though they’d been in an otherwise happy relationship for years since she’d married them.

“Well, you haven’t been answering my questions about your column either,” the man said. Phoebe was so annoyed with him, it didn’t even concern her that she had never bothered to make note of his name.

“Again, I need to correct you,” Phoebe said, still smiling and glaring. “I haven’t agreed with your accusations. You’ve asked me very few actual questions so far.”

Mika shrugged and smiled an apology back at Phoebe. It wasn’t the publicist’s fault that Phoebe had to suffer through this chat with some blogger with an ax to grind against the newspaper industry. Mika was just doing her job protecting the paper and Phoebe.

“Okay,” the man replied in a joyous tone that caused Phoebe to suspect he was about to come at her with some kind of gotcha question. “Here’s a good one: Do you think an advice column for the lovelorn counts as actual journalism?”

Phoebe relaxed. This was the kind of question she could handle. She got it all the time. People, especially men, could be somewhat dismissive of her career. “I think advice columns are part of a proud tradition in the news industry to make papers accessible to a wider audience. The *Bay Mirror* does not just serve those looking to get in-depth analysis of the news of the day… Although we certainly do perform that job admirably, compared to websites more interested in presenting opinions as facts and pushing agendas. *Ask Phoebe* helps expand the reach of our paper by helping those who are in need of a little advice. That’s all. No harm, no foul.”

“But you yourself are not a doctor?” he said, again with a “gotcha” tone in his voice.

“And I’ve never claimed to be one,” Phoebe said. “I do have a degree in psychology, but I like to think of myself as more of a friend offering advice. I have always been up front about that in my column. My readers know who they are talking to when they write in.”

“Well, as their *friend*—” Phoebe could hear the sneer in his voice. “—what do you think the cause of all these breakups is?”

“Maintaining a marriage can be a challenge,” Phoebe said. “Sometimes problems arise that cause people to want to take a break. Sometimes the problems are insurmountable and require something more permanent. If you read my column tomorrow, you’ll get more of an idea of my thoughts on the matter. Until then, thank you so much for contacting us.”

“Just one more question!” he shouted into the phone before she could hang up.

Phoebe let her silence speak for her.

“Hello?” he said after an extended pause.

“I’m here.” Again, she glared at Mika who blew her a kiss.

“Okay, good,” he said. “Do you consider yourself responsible at all for the situation your couples are in right now?”

It was an impossible question to answer. As an advice columnist, she knew she wasn’t to blame for how her readers reacted. All she could do was give them advice and hope they followed it to a reasonable conclusion. She certainly didn’t think that every single priest, judge, or Elvis impersonator that joined two people in matrimony were responsible for the marriages that followed.

But this wasn’t quite the situation at hand. Something magical was affecting these couples, and the odds were that it was all related to Phoebe in some way. These people might have been breaking up because Phoebe married them, but not because of the “advice columnist” part of her job. This was likely related to the other hat she wore. But even then, she was not the one who had set this evil plan—whatever it is—into motion. She was likely as much a victim herself.

“No,” she replied. “I don’t feel responsible at all.” Phoebe hung up the phone without another word.

Mika was on her feet before the receiver was back in its cradle. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Phoebe waved her off. “Not your fault. The situation forced us to make a statement. I’ve spoken to the blogger. Now I’ve got to address my audience. Elise already pulled tomorrow’s column. Now I just have to write a replacement before the print deadline.”

“You are a true professional,” Mika said, pouring it on a little thick for Phoebe’s tastes.

“You can thank me with coffee and pastry in the morning.” Phoebe opened up her laptop. “Now go.”

“There will be a chocolate croissant waiting for you tomorrow.” Mika saluted before she turned to leave the office, leaving Phoebe alone with her thoughts.

She couldn’t dwell on the magical part of the problem, at least not while she wrote her response to her mortal audience. She had to figure out how to explain the inexplicable in a way that protected the paper and still offered some kind of reasonable advice to people actually going through their own problems. And she had to do it all with her typical *Ask Phoebe* flair. *And* she had to do it on deadline.

With no clue what to write, she started out how she usually did in these situations and wrote without thinking, hoping that somewhere along the way she’d come up with an idea.

It took three paragraphs that Phoebe knew she’d be deleting before she picked up a thread that she could build her article from. It was all about external factors getting in the way of a marriage. She focused on things like jobs and family, leaving out any reference to magical influences, but the advice was still the same. When outside influences were coming at you, you had to work together as a couple to deal with them. It was a bit simplistic considering that the current couples could only do so much on their own against magic, but it translated fine for her regular audience.

Phoebe was halfway through her new column when a familiar pink glow appeared beside her desk. She paused in her writing to greet her husband with a kiss. “This is a surprise.”

“I wish it was a pleasant one.” Coop was having trouble looking Phoebe in the eye. It was not a good sign. “I’ve got some news.”

“I can tell.”

Coop slumped into the chair that Mika had vacated earlier. It was rare for Phoebe to ever see him like this. Cupids tended to be fairly positive people; to the point that it got annoying at times. Seeing Coop depressed was almost disturbing. Suddenly her husband, who usually towered over her, seemed small.

“I figured out who is breaking up your couples,” Coop said. “It has less to do with you than it does with me.”

Phoebe placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Explain.”

“His name is Dafydd,” Coop said. “He’s a fallen Cupid.”

“A *fallen* Cupid?” Phoebe asked. “Like a fallen angel?”

“Pretty much,” Coop said.

“And you’re the reason he fell?” Phoebe guessed as she moved around the desk to take her chair.

“Well, no. But I’m the one who outed him.”

Phoebe nodded for him to continue.

“It was a while ago,” Coop said. “Long before I met you. Actually, now that I think of it, this was before you were born. I know it was around the early seventies. Dates begin to blur after a while.”

“I’d imagine.”

“Dafydd was a senior Cupid,” Coop explained. “He trained me and Kama and a bunch of us. Raised us, actually. Oversaw our upbringing from the time we were cherubs. Taught us everything about the Cupid lifestyle. Helped us come to terms with the mortal lives we had lost out on since we

all died so young. And he was good at it. Fatherhood came naturally to him considering that he, like the rest of us, never knew his own parents. Of course, he'd had a lot of practice by the time I came to Cupid's temple. Dafydd's been around a while."

"Sounds like it."

"He was *good* at the job," Coop said, like he was trying to make sense of the story as he shared it. "One of the best. A straight shooter in every possible way." Coop laughed to himself. "Perfect score on the archery range. Dafydd had the highest success rate of couples in the history of Cupids going all the way back to the time of Eros."

"Eros? I thought he was Greek."

"He was on vacation in Italy when the whole idea for an army of Cupids came up," Coop explained. "It's a long story."

"And we've probably only got time for one long story right now," Phoebe said, though her curiosity was piqued. In all this time, she never really asked Coop how the Cupids first came about. She kind of thought of them as always existing, like Whitelighters. But obviously there had to be a first. Naturally, she'd always thought it was just… Cupid. But now was not the time for history lessons. "What made Dafydd turn?"

"Not what," Coop said. "*Who*. Her name was Marsha. She was an artist. No one famous, but she had the potential to break out if Dafydd hadn't intervened. She was destined to fall in love with a banker. A typical opposites-attract scenario. I've assisted with dozens of them. Couples who are meant to get together, but have trouble seeing beyond their differences. We give them a little nudge to get past their initial bias and recognize the possibilities. Most times it's a simple assignment."

"Until?"

"Dafydd fell in love with her," Coop said. "No. It wasn't as clear as that. He became obsessed. Thought the banker wasn't good enough for her.

Thought no one was."

"He stalked her?"

"Well, yes, but that wasn't the worst part," Coop said. "He used his powers over her to make her fall in love with him."

Phoebe sucked in some air. "I'm guessing that's frowned upon. As it should be."

"'Frowned upon' doesn't even begin to explain it," Coop said. "Cupids are agents of love. We aren't supposed to fall in love ourselves. Except in special circumstances."

"Like with a Charmed One?"

Coop smiled. "*Very* special circumstances. It isn't illegal for us to fall in love. I mean, it's not encouraged, but it has happened."

"I never realized."

"It's in the way we're raised from the time we're cherubs," Coop explained. "Our expression of love generally comes from bringing others together. That's how we find fulfillment. We carry a piece of every couple we've matched with us. It's kind of difficult for one person to compete with all the love we already have inside, to make us yearn for a love that comes from a single being. It takes a very special person to make a Cupid feel that the love in our own hearts is not enough to sustain us. To find a soul mate that can equal the love we already possess… the odds are infinitesimal. It's why I didn't realize at first that you were my soul mate. It's so incredibly rare."

Phoebe smiled. "I think I've just gotten the best compliment of my life."

Coop reached across the desk and took her hands in his. She felt the warmth of his love flowing through the connection, which made the expression on his face all the more painful to see. "Dafydd hadn't found a soul mate. Marsha didn't feel the love that he felt for her. But the real

problem was that once a Cupid uses his powers to make a person fall in love there is no way to undo it. It's the first rule that every cherub learns."

"But Cupids make people fall in love all the time," Phoebe said.

"No, actually. We don't. We persuade. We set up situations. We encourage what is already there. But we don't create love. And we certainly don't force a mortal to fall in love with one of us."

Phoebe nodded. It made sense. She was constantly telling her readers that love had to come from a natural place. If mortals couldn't force it to happen, why would Cupids be able to? "How did you find out about him?"

"I was sent to follow up on Marsha and her banker," Coop said. "Their path to a union had suddenly come undone, but Dafydd couldn't explain why. His reports were totally shoddy, missing key information. It wasn't like him at all. When I went to investigate, it wasn't that hard to figure out what happened."

"So you reported it," Phoebe said. "And then?"

"Dafydd was stripped of his ring," Coop explained. "With no way to channel his magic he was lost for a long time. Imagine if you knew you had the wonderful gifts you possessed, but suddenly forgot how to use them. That every time you tried to force a premonition, you saw everything but what you wanted. Or what you saw was a lie. Or gibberish that you couldn't make sense of."

"I'd feel completely useless," Phoebe said.

"But the worst part was that Marsha was hidden from him for her own protection," Coop continued. "Her love for him was a lie. The Cupid administration would never allow him to abuse that more than he already had."

"Please tell me she got to go away with her banker at least," Phoebe said.

Coop sighed. “It wouldn’t matter if she had. Any chance for them had been destroyed. Any chance for anyone other than Dafydd had been destroyed. Marsha would live out the rest of her days pining for a man she would never have.”

“That poor woman.”

“It’s what Dafydd blames me for,” Coop said. “If it was just about him having his powers stripped, he would have gotten over it. But he sees me as the one that damned Marsha to a life of solitude. He’s hated me ever since. For a Cupid—even a former one—there is no more dangerous emotion than hate.”

The sadness Phoebe saw in her husband’s eyes was not just from his story. “This is not your fault,” she insisted. “What happened back then? Dafydd did that to himself. What’s happening now is his fault too.”

“But if I hadn’t--”

“*No*,” she insisted. “It’s in the job description for both of us. We’re here to fulfill the roles intended for us. That brings us up against bad things from time-to-time. Okay, all the time. But still, you are no more responsible for what’s going on now than I am for every time the Source of All Evil returns seeking vengeance. That’s just the way of the world.”

“But I feel--”

“*No*.”

Coop revealed a shy but grateful smile as Phoebe squeezed his hands. Nothing more needed to be said between them on that matter.

“What I want to know,” Phoebe said, “is how is he doing this if he doesn’t have his ring anymore?”

“He must have gotten one,” Coop said. “And if we find out how, it might tell us everything we need to know.”

CHAPTER 19

Paige was impressed. Phoebe's column was always an entertaining read, but today her sister had really outdone herself. She'd written so deeply about love and commitment and the challenges of keeping a marriage fresh that Paige wanted to orb over to Henry's office just to tell him that she loved him. Considering how often she popped by unexpectedly when magical calamities struck, she decided to send him a text instead so his coworkers didn't get tired of seeing her. Her message to Henry was filled with every romantic emoticon in her phone. She wasn't usually the smiley-faces-with-hearts-in-the-eyes and kissy lips type, but she was feeling un-ironically gushy by the end of Phoebe's column.

Even with Paige's busy life shuffling between her kids, her Charges, and those aforementioned magical calamities that came her way, she always tried to carve out a bit of her day to read her sister's work. The article Phoebe had written in response to the mass breakups of the couples she had married did everything it needed to do. It explained her perspective on the situation, gave some tips to others out there with marriages on the rocks, and seemed to include some kind of vague threat to some unknown "forces" that seemed to be working to pull the couples apart.

That last part was the most interesting. Thanks to a brief text message exchange the previous night, Paige knew exactly which "unknown force" Phoebe was referring to. But none of them knew what, if anything, it had to do with their gorgon situation.

Paige had stayed up with Piper late the night before testing food to see what was in it. No recognizable poisons had come up by the time Paige had to orb home to help Henry put the kids to bed. Some nights, her children were perfectly agreeable and went off to “sleepytime” without a care in the world. Last night had not been one of those times. She’d spent so much time trying to get Henry and the twins to bed that she’d hardly managed to get enough sleep herself. She’d poured herself a coffee in one of the big mugs the moment she got to Piper’s that morning.

Paige was just finishing off that coffee when Piper returned from getting her own kids and her husband off to Magic School. Paige’s niece and nephews weren’t even remotely prepared when she popped in this morning, so Paige had sent her kids ahead while Piper and Leo continued to wrangle their brood.

It was Magic Fair Day at Magic School and Leo was one of the judges for the student projects. He couldn’t take off to help like he had the day before. Not everyone had the freedom to blow off their jobs at a moment’s notice. Honestly, Piper didn’t really have that kind of flexibility either. She also didn’t have much of a choice until she figured out what needed to be done to reopen her doors.

“The kids got off okay,” Piper said as she poured herself her own, smaller, cup of coffee. “Mel is wearing two totally different sneakers because apparently that’s what looks good according to her. I eventually got tired of fighting. If she wants to be mismatched and walk with a slight limp, so be it.”

“Your daughter is destined to be a trendsetter,” Paige said. “Two different shoes is probably one of the least weird things kids at Magic School will ever see.”

“Good point.”

Paige handed the paper to her sister as Piper slipped into the chair across from her. “You should read Phoebe’s article. It’s really good. Especially for something she rushed to come up with last night.”

“I’ll check it out later,” Piper said as she put it down on the table. “I’ve got news. I didn’t have the chance to tell you while Chris was running around with his underwear on his head, but I figured out what was in the food. Considering recent events, I’m not sure why we didn’t test for it right away.”

Paige leaned forward. “I’m intrigued.”

Piper smiled the satisfied smile of a mother who figured something out after staying up working too late the night before. “Ambrosia.”

“The food of the gods?” Paige said. “So this *is* tied to the gorgons.”

Piper pulled out her cell phone. “Seems pretty likely. I didn’t want to call Suzanne too early, but I’m hoping she’ll be up by now.”

Paige considered the ramifications of Piper’s discovery while her sister waited for the chef to pick up. What she knew about ambrosia from her mythology lessons in school was probably comparable to the tales of the gorgons: a little fact mixed with mostly fiction.

“Suzanne,” Piper said into her phone, pulling Paige’s attention toward eavesdropping. “Hope I didn’t wake you.”

Paige couldn’t hear the chef’s end of the conversation. Suzanne was somewhat soft-spoken, which always made it difficult for Paige on the rare occasions she helped out in Piper’s kitchen. The look on Piper’s face suggested that Suzanne had been up already.

“I’m working on the problem and you’ll be happy to hear it doesn’t look at all like you could have done anything about it,” Piper explained. “Someone tampered with the food in your kitchen. I was wondering if you happened to have noticed a strange woman, or maybe *three* women, hanging around yesterday?”

Paige strained to listen, but could barely make out the muffled sounds of a voice coming through the line. It didn't matter. After a few "uh-huhs" and "okays," Piper ended the call.

"Was it them?" Paige asked as soon as the cell phone screen went dark.

"No," Piper replied. "At least, Suzanne didn't see any strange women. But she did have a bizarre interaction with a man who claimed to work for the health inspector."

"Tell me she didn't leave him in the kitchen alone," Paige said.

"That's the bizarre part," Piper said. "Suzanne would *never* leave a stranger in her kitchen. And yet, she clearly recalls him coming in, but doesn't remember him leaving. Or anything about the encounter. In fact, she completely forgot him until I specifically asked her if anyone came by."

"Which is why she never mentioned it to us last night," Paige guessed. "Okay, so now we have a new player in the mix. Do we think it's the same guy messing with Phoebe? The former cupid?"

"I hope so," Piper said. "I can't take anymore new villains. I've already got my fill."

Paige forced a smile. "Oh, but this is fun! And by *fun*, I mean incredibly annoying."

"Tell me about it," Piper said. "According to Leo, ambrosia isn't intended for mortals. It's incredibly dangerous."

"I thought it did good things," Paige said. "Like make people live forever, or be really strong and stuff like that."

Piper took a sip of her coffee. "Not so much. It can be deadly. Sounds like what we got last night was a mild case."

"If that was mild, I'd hate to see it in full effect."

Piper put down her mug. "I can't reopen Halliwell's until I figure out what foods need to be replaced. I might have to restock the entire kitchen. This is going to get expensive."

“Especially with you paying the staff for these unplanned vacation days,” Paige added.

Piper shrugged. “It’s not their fault they work for a Charmed One.” Piper added another cube of sugar to her coffee as Phoebe and Coop came into the kitchen. “Running a little late this morning?”

“P.J. didn’t like the outfit I picked for her,” Phoebe replied as she went for the coffeemaker. “It was four rounds of debate followed by two complete costume changes before Coop could beam us out.”

“All I had to deal with was shoes,” Piper said with mild relief in her tone.

“Probably for the best,” Paige added. “It gets crowded in that attic when we’re all up there at once.”

“And the fewer people witnessing my children’s clothing catastrophes the better,” Piper added as she took another sip.

“P.J. and Parker are comfortably at Magic School daycare,” Coop said as Phoebe finished off the pot of coffee, handing him a cup of coffee. He put it down on the table and focused on his sisters-in-law. “I assume Phoebe updated you on our situation?”

“As much as she could in a text,” Piper said. “And we might have an update on that too.”

Paige watched Coop’s face fall as Piper filled him in on their latest suspicions. They didn’t know for sure that this Dafydd person had been the one to poison the food at Halliwell’s, but they had enough information for an educated guess. It was probably the last thing Coop wanted to hear.

Coop was pulling Piper out of her seat and into a hug by the time she was done. “Piper, I’m so sorry that the restaurant got caught up in this mess.”

“Thanks, Coop, but you don’t need to do that,” Piper said as he released her. “From what Phoebe told me, you were only doing your job. Besides,

we don’t know for sure that Dafydd was behind it or what his motivation is.”

“If it is him, his motivation seems to be getting back to me through my family,” Coop said. “I hurt the person he loved. He wants to hurt everyone I love.”

“We should let them know at Magic School to keep an extra eye on the girls,” Phoebe said, placing a hand on her husband’s arm. “Just as a precaution.”

Piper pulled out her phone and started texting. “They already keep so many eyes on our kids that it’s probably not necessary, but I’ll give Leo the heads up.”

“What I don’t get is that Phoebe said Dafydd’s not a Cupid anymore,” Paige said. “How does he have *any* power?”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Coop said. “He was never stripped of his abilities. Just his ring.”

“I thought the ring was the power,” Piper said.

“It is and it isn’t,” Coop replied. “When Cupids are reborn as cherubs we have no inherent power. It comes from the ring, which we get as soon as we’re old enough to wear it. As a father now, I’m beginning to suspect that that comes when we’re old enough to be sure that we won’t accidentally swallow it.”

“Smart plan,” Phoebe said.

“That’s why it’s so strange that the girls are showing Cupid powers,” Coop said. “Like how P.J. can beam without using a ring. I think being the child of a Cupid and a Charmed One gave her more skills than she should possess.”

“You think P.J. beaming all over the place isn’t her active witch power? That she can do other things too?” Paige asked.

Phoebe shrugged. “We’ve talked about it, but we can’t be sure. The girls are still so young. We’ll just have to watch them as they grow up. I’m sure all our kids are going to surprise us in a bunch of different ways.”

“Oh, goody,” Paige said. “Something to look forward to.” Paige often regretting binding her daughters’ powers, but it was times like these that she saw the value in the decision. She’d only agreed to do it after many long conversations with Henry, but they felt it was safer that way. With Henry Jr. being adopted with no inherent powers of his own, it just felt like, as a family, they should wait to let the girls come into their gifts when they were a little older to keep everyone safe. As logical as that decision was, Paige still questioned herself over it every single time she watched her nieces and nephews use their naturally born skills.

“But you can still use your magic without your ring,” Piper noted.

“Over time a bond forms between the Cupid and the ring,” Coop explained. “The love magic becomes a part of that Cupid. I can still access it without my ring, but it isn’t nearly as strong as when I have it. But it’s different when a Cupid is stripped of a ring. Like I told Phoebe, he would still have his magic, but trying to use it would be difficult.”

“Which is why we have to figure out where this new ring came from,” Phoebe said.

“I’m thinking the ambrosia might be a clue,” Paige said. “Far as I remember, that’s the food of the Greek gods, not the Roman ones. And Cupid was a Roman god, if I recall correctly.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Coop said.

“Never is,” Paige replied.

“The entire Cupid Corps dates back to the original Greek god, Eros,” Coop explained. “Suffice it to say, if I’d eaten Piper’s food last night, I wouldn’t have gotten sick. It actually would have been the best meal I ever had.”

“And it would have been so nice if the gorgons and Dafydd were linked,” Paige said as she felt her cell phone vibrate in her pocket.

“I’m not so sure they’re not,” Phoebe said. “It’s too big a coincidence that we’re dealing with two kinds of ancient mythological powers at the same time.”

Piper clapped her hands together once, with forced enthusiasm. “Okay, then. One more mystery to add to the list!”

Paige held up her phone. “That’s not all we have for the list.”

“I’m really beginning to hate this era of being constantly connected,” Piper said. “What’s wrong now?”

“Same spells, different day,” Paige said. “Two more statues overnight. Prue just texted me the links.”

“Don’t these gorgons ever sleep?” Phoebe asked.

“To be fair, we did take some time off to deal with our non-witchy lives,” Piper said as she grabbed the phone from Paige. “Who are the latest victims?”

Before Piper could read the article Paige had pulled up the phone began to vibrate in her hand and a picture of Prue popped up onscreen. Piper pressed it to answer the call. “Hey! What’s up?”

“Piper?” Prue said. “I thought I called Paige.”

“I’m holding her phone,” Piper replied. “She’s here and so are Phoebe and Coop.”

“I’m guessing you got my text?” Prue said. “I didn’t want to bother you while you were dealing with the restaurant.”

“That’s on hold for the moment,” Piper said. “We’ve got to deal with these two new victims.”

“Three,” Prue said.

“Three?” Phoebe repeated as she looked at the screen of her own phone. “You just sent the text.”

“It didn’t make the news yet,” Prue said. “While you all slept I… kind of did something.”

“Did what?” Piper asked warily.

“It would be best if you came here,” Prue suggested.

Paige got up from the table and took back her phone. “We’re on our way.”

“I’m going to look into Dafydd,” Coop replied. “Now that I’ve know he’s involved, I’ll go back to headquarters and see what I can pull up.”

“Okay,” Phoebe gave him a kiss. “Just keep me posted. I’ve got five more couples to protect that I just don’t have the time to keep an eye on today if we’re going to deal with these mysterious statues too.”

“Will do,” Coop said as he beamed away.

A moment later the Charmed Ones disappeared as well.

CHAPTER 20

Coop looked out over the Italian coastline as he tried to suppress the guilt that was overwhelming him. To feel anything other than joyous love while in Cupid's temple was upsetting. The depth of his dark emotion was surprising. He tried to tap into the temple's more euphoric properties, but only rewarded himself with a headache.

Logically, he knew that the Charmed Ones were right. This wasn't his fault. He'd just been doing his job when he'd made an enemy out of one of his oldest friends in the world. But Dafydd had broken the rules, and it was Dafydd who'd taught Coop about those rules in the first place.

This wasn't the first time Coop had wondered if he could have played things differently. He could have spoken to Dafydd first. To get his side of the story. But *no*. What he'd done wasn't just against the rules. It was against nature. He'd forced someone to fall in love with him. Coop's intervention had made sure that Dafydd was stopped before he'd forced Marsha to do anything else against her will. Dafydd's actions weren't just a betrayal of his work as a Cupid, they were immoral and horrific. Marsha was a victim of Dafydd's sick obsession. And now Coop, his family, and Phoebe's readers were more casualties in the way of a man who needed to be stopped. But how?

Coop pulled himself from his dark thoughts when he saw Kama returning from the vault. She was dressed in one of her typically flowing white dresses, a striking look against her dark skin. But it was her expression that struck Coop the most. Kama wasn't normally one for panic,

but she looked to be barely holding it together at the moment. “You were right. Someone got into the vault.”

“One of the rings is missing?” Coop asked with worry edging into his own voice. A missing Cupid ring was bad, but it still didn’t explain her manner. Kama was more than just Coop’s superior. She was a friend. She’d also spent more time basking in the euphoric properties of the temple than any other cupid so the fear he saw in her eyes was disquieting.

“It’s worse than that,” she said, taking a seat on the edge of the fountain. “He has the Eros Ring.”

Coop dropped beside her, nearly falling into the sparkling water. “How is that possible? A fallen cupid couldn’t get into the vault and take it.”

“No,” she said, straightening her posture and pulling herself together. As warm and loving as Kama could be, she was also a no-nonsense type who had incredible control of her emotions. “A fallen Cupid could never set foot in the temple. He must have had help.”

“But who could get into the vault? Not even Elders can do that.”

Kama nodded. “That vault is secure, but not impenetrable. But it would require magic from the time of its creation, from the time of Eros.”

“Guess that answers our question,” Coop said. “Medusa and her sisters come from that time. They would have been able to get into the vault.”

“This doesn’t sound like the Medusa I know from my studies of history,” Kama said. “But it could have been her sisters. They never struck me as trustworthy. I never believed they went after Athena to protect their sister. I think they wanted the power back that they’d lost when Medusa was made into a gorgon.”

“This is bad, isn’t it?” Coop asked. “The Eros Ring being gone?”

“It means we can’t create any other Cupid rings,” Kama said. “Eros is the source that makes our magic possible. Without it, we’re down to the half-dozen rings we’ve got in the vault. Once they’re gone, that’s it for

Cupids. If anything happens to the existing rings, we'll have to give up our calling. Phoebe's readership will be nothing compared to the uncouplings that will take effect all over the world. Of course, that's the distant problem. The current issue is what Dafydd could do with the ring today. Breaking up a few couples is nothing compared to the power it holds."

"I don't get it," Coop said. "Why wasn't he completely stripped of his powers when he was caught? If he no longer had any magic, he could never connect with a ring again. He wouldn't be a threat now."

Kama signed. "We're not the Elders. We do things a little differently here. To exile a Cupid is intended to be a learning experience, not a punishment. What was done to Dafydd was done because we hoped one day he would learn his lesson and repent for his actions. We thought the love magic of a Cupid would overpower his twisted emotions and set him back on the proper path. We were clearly wrong."

"You had good intent," Coop said. "But, yes. You gave him far more credit than he deserved."

"And now we're all paying the price," Kama said.

"Starting with my wife."

Kama gently placed her hand on Coop's. "There's something else you should know."

Coop forced a smile. "Of course there is."

"With the ring of Eros," Kama said. "Dafydd has the power to undo more than just mortal love. He can also tear down relationships that have been blessed in the Heavens. Like relationship between a Cupid and a Charmed One."

Coop felt his heart drop, which for a Cupid was an agonizing experience. He'd suspected something like this in the back of his mind since he learned Dafydd was behind this plot. But to hear the words spoken aloud was something else entirely. "Is there a way to undo the damage?"

“We need to get the ring back,” Kama said. “It’s the only way to undo the damage to the mortal relationships.”

Coop didn’t like her choice of phrasing. “And *my* relationship if he uses it against me?”

Kama shook her hear. “I don’t know. I can’t say what will happen when the magic of Eros is used against a Cupid.”

Coop stood, ready to beam wherever he needed to go. There had to be a way to get through the Dafydd. “Then I’ll get the ring back. I have the best chance of anyone to convince him to turn the ring over.”

Kama rose as well, with a sad smile on her face. “Would that it were that simple. But the ring would have bonded with Dafydd immediately. Even if you could convince him to let it go, there’s only one way to remove it now.”

“How?”

“There’s a crystal goblet in the vault,” Kama said. “It’s still there. I checked. I’ve posted guards to protect it. Dafydd needs to drink from it.”

“I’m guessing there’s more?”

Kama nodded. “He needs to drink water taken from the River Styx.”

Coop almost laughed. “Kama, Styx is a myth. It doesn’t exist.”

“I don’t know about that,” Kama said. “It’s the only way to break the bond, so it has to be real. There’s no other option. There’s no other way. If you don’t find the river, Dafydd is going to destroy the work of Cupids all over the world.”

“It’s okay,” Coop said. “We might not know where the River Styx is, but I may have access to the perfect guide.”

Prue watched as Paige, Piper, and Phoebe orbed in with the newest statue for the collection. At present count, there were almost twenty victims, not

including the congressman who'd lucked out and got turned back to normal before they lost the magical mojo.

The gorgons had been busier than anyone had thought overnight. There were four new statues: two that the media had caught wind of—forcing the Charmed Ones to pull their switch under the watchful eye of the police—and two that they'd discovered by other means. Correction: Two that Prue had discovered by other means that she hadn't told her sisters about yet.

"I think that's it for now," Piper said as the trio collapsed onto the couch.

"I *hope* that's it for now," Paige said. "All this orbing back and forth around the world is exhausting."

"Making all these statues under these conditions isn't much fun either," Prue said. "I still don't think I captured the likeness on that last one properly."

"It melted down before anyone could get a good look," Phoebe assured her as she looked around the living room. "Where did Cole go?"

"Off on an errand," Prue said. She didn't think it was best to tell Phoebe that her husband had popped in a moment ago and taken her ex-husband off on some mysterious mission. He'd been very obviously trying to get out of there before Phoebe came back. Probably didn't want to worry her. Prue wasn't about to do that herself when she didn't fully understand what was going on. They had enough issues to deal with.

Paige was already consulting her phone. "So far, people are still going with that viral marketing campaign to explain the weird statues. Looks like Medusa and her sisters have gotten shy since the attack at that website."

Prue paced behind her sisters. "I wonder why. They made such a splash at those offices. Then they take their next victims quietly? It doesn't make sense. None of this makes sense, really. Least of all how it took you all so

long to let me know you weren't coming back last night. I had to entertain that dwarf and fairy for hours."

Piper stood up and came around the couch, standing in front of Prue to stop her mid-pace. "You're stalling,"

Prue adopted an innocent expression that she'd learned from watching it on Phoebe's face over many, many years. "I'm what?"

"Don't you act like Phoebe," Piper said. "You called us here because you did something, but you still haven't told us what it was."

"I thought it made more sense for us to take care of those statues first," Prue said. "Before anyone got to them and tried to figure out what they're made of. Or worse… decided to break them into tiny pieces and throw them out with the trash. That's not so much stalling as it is a good day's work."

Piper looked to Phoebe. "She learned a lot from you."

Phoebe nodded proudly with a big smile. "That she did."

Piper turned back to Prue. "Okay. Spill."

"I knew about the third victim before you did," Prue said. "And the fourth."

"Yeah," Piper said. "You told us."

"Did you get a news alert?" Phoebe asked as she pushed herself up and sat on the edge of the couch.

"More like a Nexus alert," Prue said.

Now, Paige came around the couch to join them. "Was it like last time? Did the Nexus send you a vision?"

"Not exactly." Prue moved away from her sisters. It was easier to admit this without them on top of her. "I've been experimenting with the Nexus of the All. Testing its powers. Trying to figure out how I'm linked to it… *if* I'm linked to it. Sometimes it sends me messages."

"The tattoos," Paige said. "We know."

The newly formed, constantly shifting tattoos on Prue's body were just one of the side effects of her new place in the universe. Occasionally, the tattoos gave her warnings or clues to some piece of information. It had only happened a few times so far, but they had become incredibly useful. She'd also had visions, forced on her when the balance of magic in the realms was altered through artificial means.

"I was trying to see if I could pull information from the Nexus," Prue said. "Sort of how Phoebe can force a premonition now. If the Nexus of the All is connected to the magic of the universe, this could be like an early warning system."

"Makes sense," Phoebe said.

But Piper was more wary. "So why were you so afraid to tell us about it?"

"I wouldn't say I was *afraid*."

Piper gave her the same look Prue used to give her younger sister growing up. "Do you want me to start calling you Phoebe?"

"Hey," Phoebe said. "Was I just insulted?"

Prue threw up her hands in resignation. She'd stalled long enough. "To access the power of the Nexus, I have to tap into the magic within me."

Phoebe shrugged. "Again, I say: makes sense."

"*All* the magic within me," Prue said with emphasis. She knew this wasn't going to be easy. Oh sure, Phoebe and Paige would go along with it. But Piper…

"The *demonic* powers within you," Piper said through clenched teeth as she pieced it together.

"I *am* tied to the Underworld," Prue reminded her. "It's not my choice. None of this was. I'm just trying to make the best out of a crappy situation."

Paige stepped in the middle of the conversation. "Scolding later. Information now. What did you see?"

“I didn’t *see* anything,” Prue said. “Not really. It wasn’t a vision like last time. More like a blip.”

“A blip?” Piper asked with a whole lot of skepticism in her tone. “What kind of blip?”

Prue searched for the right words, but none came to her. “I don’t know how to explain it. It was more than a feeling, but less than a premonition.”

“That’s a shame,” Phoebe said. “Because if Prue starts getting premonitions, I can go on vacation more often.”

“Sorry, but no one goes on vacation till I get out of this place,” Prue said.

“But back to the point,” Paige said. “I swear, how did you people get anything done before I came along? Talk about your tangents.”

Prue smiled. “I enjoy her more and more every day.”

“Love you too, sis,” Paige said. “Now, continue.”

“Okay, yes,” Prue said. “I was reaching out to the universe and I kind of tapped into the gorgons’ plans. Well, more like I felt their intentions. But it was confusing. They were conflicted.”

“Well, they are three sisters,” Piper noted. “Conflicts are bound to arise.”

Phoebe and Paige let out a knowing chuckle as Prue continued: “It was more than that. It was like… well, it was like us when we don’t agree on something. I don’t mean like when we can’t decide to do for the holidays. I mean, like when we first found out we were witches and we each had totally different reactions. I don’t think Medusa and her sisters are equally committed on this plan to turn people to stone.”

“And yet is hasn’t stopped them from doing it,” Paige said with an eye on the growing sculpture garden in Prue’s living room. “I wish I could be this productive when I’m indecisive.”

Piper crossed her arms, contemplatively. “Maybe Medusa’s forcing them to do this. Leo did say she was supposed to be dead. It’s possible she came back somehow and took control of her sisters who were living quietly on their own for thousands of years managing not to turn people to stone.”

“And maybe her sisters woke her, forcing her to go along with their plan as a sign of appreciation for getting her life back,” Prue countered, taking Piper’s comment a little more personally than she intended. Her sister obviously wasn’t comparing their situations, but something about this whole thing was getting under Prue’s skin. Then again, she already had a lot of conflicting magic under that same skin, so it was possibly a bit of that as well. Her tattoos had been shifting ominously ever since she tried to tap into the power of the Nexus of the All.

“Either way, it might be something we could exploit,” Phoebe suggested. “Identify the weak link and appeal to her to stop what they’re doing or at least slow down.”

Paige looked to Prue. “You said something about the gorgons’ plans? Didn’t happen to get an itinerary, did you?”

Prue laughed. If only it were that easy. “Nothing that clear. I just knew they were about to attack someone. I tried it again this morning right before I sent you that text and the same thing happened.”

“But you didn’t see who the victim was?” Piper asked.

“No, but I felt like the person was right there in front of me. Just out of reach.” Prue held out a hand as an example. “The victim had been closer to me than you three are right now. But the magic didn’t reveal who it was until after the fact. And then it was too late.”

“Think you can do it again?” Paige asked. “Maybe you’ll get better with practice. We might be able to actually stop an attack.”

“Or at least show up before the media arrives,” Phoebe said.

Prue shrugged. “I can try.”

Prue sat down on the floor, crossing her legs and closing her eyes. She concentrated on the Nexus and the magic that rested inside her body. She had absorbed a powerful object of magic from each side in the battle of good and evil. Those items rested inside her now—ever-present—a part of her. It was that magic she called on to guide her.

The Nexus of the All connected with her immediately, combining with her own magic and reaching out through the human world. Her body remained in its prison, but her essence filled the world. It was different from the astral projection she had been able to access before her death. Prue was still trapped in her prison. It was more like her connection to the world at large was traveling, not her. It wasn't even a conscious thing. More like an emotional one.

Prue honed in on her hometown. Flashes of San Francisco filled her mind. Brief images that connected her with the place where she'd been raised and caused her, once again, to miss the life that she'd lost. The images flooded her mind as she bounced from neighborhood to neighborhood, seeking out magic. San Francisco was something of a hub of magical influence on Earth, likely due to the presence of the Charmed Ones. Prue had to pick through that magic to find what she was looking for. She could feel her family in every neighborhood. It was something she'd never noticed back when she was alive.

It took some time, but eventually she made the connection that was quickly starting to feel familiar. The conflict she'd felt earlier was still there. If anything, it had gotten deeper, filled with a new deception.

Prue felt an ancient magic, older than the city. It wasn't an unusual phenomenon. Some of the magic the Charmed Ones had fought was as old as the world itself. *Older*. But this felt like the right one. It wasn't all that different from the feeling she had when she was with her own sisters. It had to be the gorgons.

Prue's eyes popped open. "They've got another Innocent in their sights. I can't tell you who or where, but I think I can send you there. You might even be able to reach him before the gorgons get there."

"So, it's another him?" Phoebe said with a glance toward the statues, which were overwhelmingly male.

"Definitely male," Prue said. "Strong. Young. But that's all I've got."

"Then that's all we need." Piper grabbed Phoebe, who got a grasp on Paige in turn. Paige held out her hand to connect with Prue's arm which was filled with those shifting tattoos. They'd used this method before to communicate, and it worked again. The look in Paige's eyes confirmed that she knew where to go and she didn't waste time getting there. The trio orbed away to deal with the attack, leaving Prue behind as she sat with her legs crossed, floating several inches over the floor.

As they left, Prue received her clearest image yet. Across the world, her sisters materialized in the middle of a college stadium filled with strong young men in the middle of a track meet. There were strong young women as well. And spectators. And a lot of cameras.

As the image began to fade, Prue worried that the gorgons were about to step up their plan with another very public attack. And she'd sent her sisters there with hundreds of potential targets and no way to narrow them down to their Innocent.

Prue drifted down to the floor as she once again felt completely helpless, trapped and alone thousands of miles away from the action.

CHAPTER 21

Medusa did not like what she was seeing.

No. That wasn't true. She *loved* the sight. She loved it more than she could express. And that was exactly the problem.

Her brown human eyes had returned. So much like the color of the soil her father struggled to farm when she was a child. She immediately felt like herself again, in spite of the snakes softly hissing beneath her glamour. What was it Euryale had said earlier? Something about "the eyes being the window to the soul"? These brown eyes were a window to her human soul, one that she never wanted to close.

But she would have to close them to avoid Stheno seeing them for herself. It had taken every argument Medusa could come up with to keep Stheno from making another spectacle with the other victims they'd chosen overnight. Medusa had tried to convince her sisters to put a stop to their plan entirely, but that had been useless. The best she could do was agree to help them in exchange for remaining anonymous. It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

Now that her eyes no longer looked like those of the serpents she wore on her head, everything would change. It meant her power was at full strength and, by default, so were Stheno's and Euryale's. They didn't need to remain tied to this city any longer to use their magic. They didn't need to be linked with Medusa.

It was that last part that worried her the most. As long as Stheno and Euryale were with her, Medusa could watch them and try to rein them in.

Once they were on their own again, free to wreak havoc unchecked, she could no longer affect their actions.

Her sisters were only in this situation because of her. They had gone to Athena to defend Medusa and beg for the curse to be undone. It hadn't ended well.

Once again, Medusa had to remind herself that the guilt she felt was misplaced. This was not her fault. None of it was. Poseidon had stolen her virtue. Athena had punished *her* for it instead of the man who really was to blame. The gods of Ancient Greece were all power-mad, and history apparently had forgiven them for their transgressions, but Medusa had not.

But history had also stolen her opportunity for vengeance. Athena was gone. Nothing more than a story to the people of today. And Stheno's plan for revenge, while noble in its misguided way, was just as misdirected as Athena's actions had been. Whether or not Medusa was responsible for any of it was unimportant. Stheno and Euryale were her sisters. And she was responsible for *them*.

As Medusa looked longingly into the brown eyes reflected at her in the screen of the cell phone she'd slipped out of Euryale's bag, she regretfully used her glamour to change them back to their cursed form. As long as neither sister gazed too closely into them, she should be able to stall them in their grand plan.

She was beginning to think it might be better to be free of her sisters. Let Stheno do what she wanted and leave it for someone else to correct. Otherwise Medusa would have to follow her around the world turning Stheno's victims back to normal. The one saving grace in this was that Medusa was still the most powerful by far.

In an odd way, Euryale was slightly more of a concern. Medusa could not even anticipate the kind of trouble her more free-spirited sister would create.

There was another phrase Medusa had learned that perfectly explained Euryale with magic: like a bull in a china shop. Even worse than a sister with an agenda was one that made decisions on a whim.

At the heart of it, these were still her sisters and she did love them. She just needed to get them to focus on that love as well and allow that to move them past the trouble they wanted to create. But how would she work through issues that had taken thousands of years to create. Maybe it would have been better if they'd died along with her in the past.

"Has anybody seen my phone?" Euryale called from the lush hotel living room that they had set up as their temporary home.

"I've got it." Medusa put her sunglasses back on to cover up the glamoured eyes. She came out of the bedroom, handing her sister back her connection to the world. "I was checking my image again. No change."

"You can't be serious?" Stheno said. "I would have thought your magic would be strong enough by now. Let me see."

Medusa stepped back as Stheno moved to her. "Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do." Stheno continued reaching for the glasses. "I just want to see if there's any difference at all. Maybe a little brown around the edges."

Medusa took another step back as the sisters stared one another down. She was fairly certain that Stheno was trying to see through the darkened lenses. It was clear that she didn't trust Medusa. Not that it mattered because the glamour was more than strong enough with the manufactured darkness between them.

What really hurt Medusa was that they'd once been close. The three of them had shared a bond long before they had discovered that they possessed magic. And that discovery had only made their relationship grow. They'd been incredible with their gifts, saving the world from any number of horrors the gods and goddesses had let loose on the world.

But Athena’s curse, coupled with thousands of years apart, had twisted their relationship into something darker than the glasses that stood between them. Medusa had to find a way to her get sister back. Once she had Stheno, Euryale would follow. That was her way.

Stheno smiled warmly and placed a hand on Medusa’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Medusa. You don’t have to show me anything. I do believe you. I’ve just missed you for so long that I want us all to be back at full strength. That will be the first step to reclaiming our lives. It’s possible we just need to step up our use of this cursed magic we possess.”

Medusa had no doubt Stheno was being genuine. There was still love there. But there was also Stheno’s plan. “Can’t we rest? We’ve been at it all night.”

Euryale let out a cackle of laughter. “You rested for over two thousand years. If I were you, I’d be out enjoying all the world had to offer.”

“I wasn’t resting,” Medusa reminded her. Euryale did have a penchant for tactlessness.

“Well, you were at peace,” Euryale countered. “You didn’t have to live out this cursed existence. Honestly, I think you’d be a little more grateful to Stheno. She went along with your plan and stayed in her glamour even though yesterday’s big reveal was a total bust. Everybody thinks that stunt at the website was just that… a stunt.”

“It is frustrating,” Stheno said. “We need to do something on a grander scale. Announce ourselves to the world. That might give you the final push that you need to bring yourself to full strength. Truth be told, I feel like you’ve been holding back a bit.”

Medusa pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose to make sure they were secure. There was no way out of this. Stheno would keep pushing until she got what she wanted. Medusa could only stall so long. “One time,” she said. “I will bring down my glamour once. So you’d best make it count.”

Stheno’s face broke into a satisfied smile. “Oh, I intend to. I know just the man.”

Paige was disoriented when she completed the orb. She had to pause for a second and close her eyes to get her bearings, shutting out the sound of the crowd. It was an odd feeling. Typically, orbing was just like stepping into the next room for her. She’d long since gotten used to her body bursting into hundreds of tiny glowing orbs and reappearing as far away as the other side of the world.

This wasn’t the first time she’d traveled somewhere based on a location provided by Prue’s tattoos. It was an unusual sensation, but nothing compared to this. Thankfully, the dizziness subsided after a moment.

“Paige? Are you okay?” Piper asked.

Paige opened her eyes to see her sister watching her with concern, but the feeling had already passed. It was probably just her lack of breakfast. Nothing to worry about. Then she looked beyond them to see the heap of trouble they’d orbed themselves into. “I was fine until I saw where we are.”

“Yeah,” Phoebe said. “This is going to be a problem.”

The stadium was packed, which was especially odd for a weekday. Paige didn’t recognize it, but she guessed it was one of the local college campuses. Some sort of track meet was going on. Had to involve at least a dozen other schools if the number of people crowding the place was any indication. It was the largest group of Innocents all in one place that the Charmed Ones had ever come across in their magical careers. Prue’s assist had landed them right in one of the entrances to the field, neatly out of the way from the many prying eyes. It was the only saving grace so far.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” Piper said.

“Can you freeze them all?” Paige asked.

“I… guess?”

Piper had frozen larger areas in her lifetime, but never this many people. There had to be thousands. And that wasn't even counting everyone not currently on the field or in the stands. Just the thought of all the people potentially at the concessions, in the locker rooms, and in the bathrooms that could come back into the stadium at any moment was a daunting proposition to Paige and it wasn't even her power that was going to have to handle them all.

"Maybe we could start a fire," Phoebe said, prompting her sisters to look at her as if she'd gone insane. "A small one! Just enough to get everyone to evacuate."

"Yes," Paige said, though she wasn't really agreeing. "Because having someone shout 'fire' in a crowded stadium seems like a great idea."

"As opposed to shouting 'monster' when the gorgons arrive," Phoebe countered. "That's going to be a hundred times the panic."

"I can do it," Piper said, not sounding sure of herself at all. "I just need to concentrate."

"Better start now!" Paige said just as the screaming began.

Piper's hands went up and everyone on the field froze a half-second before all the people in the stands. It was a barely perceptible difference in timing, but Paige noticed. She doubted anyone else did. The people in the stands didn't even hear the screams that had just begun when Piper cut them off. Only one man and one woman had seen the gorgons appear. The noise from the crowd drowned out their terror until Piper could press pause. Paige had to wonder what the pair would think when they unfroze, assuming everything went well.

Piper kept her hands up. "I think I got them all. But I have to keep my focus for anyone that comes into the stadium. You two go. Stop the gorgons."

Phoebe was already on the move. "Oh, sure. Give us the hard job."

Paige was right behind her. The gorgons had surrounded one of the athletes on the field. Paige didn't question why the people screamed when they saw the green, scaly creatures with horrible expressions and the signature snakes in the hair that seemed to be their calling card. She probably would have done the same if she hadn't already seen much worse.

At first, Paige thought the gorgons froze along with everyone else, but the writhing snakes told her otherwise. They were unaffected by Piper's power, which wasn't completely unusual, but still rare. Piper had grown much stronger in recent years, as the stadium full of immobile bodies would attest.

The athlete was already caught in the gorgons' gaze and not going anywhere. The creature in front of him was staring right into his eyes. The other two were just as focused on him, though their eyes did not meet his. As Paige approached, she saw that he'd already turned to stone.

"They didn't freeze," Phoebe warned as they got closer.

"I noticed. Whatever you do, don't look in their eyes."

"That's going to be hard since they're coming right at us." Phoebe stopped a couple of steps ahead of her sister.

Paige pulled up short when she realized the gorgons had turned their focus from the stone athlete to the Charmed Ones. She and Phoebe both looked to the ground, careful to keep the gorgons in their peripheral vision. Paige kept her hands raised, ready to orb the gorgons back to Greece if they moved any closer. No matter their motivation, Paige wasn't about to mess with them. She'd already been turned to stone once in her life. It was not an experience she wanted to repeat.

One of the gorgons spoke: "Why did you stop us from delivering our message? Do you know what this man has done?"

"Don't really care right now," Paige said, although she'd already figured it out when she got a closer look at the victim. "What you're doing here

isn’t safe. And it certainly isn’t the best way to make your point. Not going to convince many people that this guy is a monster when they’re focused on you.”

The jock’s smug and oh-so-punchable face had been all over the news lately. He and his fraternity were at the center of a scandal that had grown beyond the campus. As president of the group, he seemed to be personally responsible for making sure every horrible stereotype about frat life was played out under his watch, with a highlight on turning the women on campus into entertainment on a scale that disgusted Paige even to think about.

“He’ll be punished for it through the proper channels,” Phoebe said, confirming to Paige that she figured things out too. Paige just wished her sister had sounded more convinced by what she was saying. “We’re more concerned with you all starting a stampede.”

“You should be worried about us destroying you!” the gorgon said.

“Stheno, stop,” one of her sisters said. “You’ve done what you came to do. We should go.”

“I haven’t done *anything*,” Stheno replied. “No one will know about us now that the Charmed Ones ruined it!”

“And once again our reputation precedes us,” Phoebe said.

“They weren’t supposed to be here,” the third sister said. “Wasn’t that part of the plan?”

“We’ve never been good with planning,” Phoebe said. “Not that I have a clue what you’re talking about.”

Paige wasn’t sure either, but she had a sneaking suspicion. It would explain the sudden career problems her sisters had been dealing with, if they were some kind of distraction to allow the gorgons time to do what they were doing.

A shadow came into Paige's field of vision. One of the gorgons was approaching. She still couldn't tell them apart. Not that it mattered at the moment. Paige pushed her hands forward to threaten the women even though she had no idea if she'd be able to orb the gorgon away. They were already immune to Piper's freezing power. "Stop right there!"

Phoebe looked back to Paige who was about a half-step behind her. "You don't happen to have a mirror in your purse, do you?"

"Do I often bring purses into battle?" One of the first rules Paige always taught her Charges was that when fighting evil it was best to do so with a minimal amount of accessorizing. She'd learned this the hard way when a dangling bracelet nearly allowed a warlock to take her out. That was the last time she ever wore anything that could snag on furniture and keep her from raising her hand.

"Can we talk this out?" Piper asked as she joined her sisters. "We get what you're doing. We're just not fans of your approach."

Paige turned back to see Piper was also keeping her eyes on the ground as she walked toward them. "You're good?" she asked.

"They're staying frozen," she said. "I think I managed it so that anyone who comes into the stadium will automatically freeze as well. And if not, I can freeze them once they see what's happening and they start screaming."

Paige turned back to the gorgons, still keeping her eyes from their faces. "My sister's right. We understand that these people deserve to be punished. We just want to talk to you about your methods. That's all."

"So you know what they've done?"

"We know why you picked them," Paige said, though she still wasn't sure which gorgon she was speaking to.

"And you know they need to be punished?" It was the same gorgon. She had much less certainty in her voice than the sister who did all the yelling. She also seemed to have a little fear as well.

Paige honed in on her as the weak link. “There are ways we can do that now. Ways that are different from how things were back in the old days.”

“Ha! The laws rarely work against people like these.” It was the first sister that had spoken again. The angry one. Paige would have thought that was Medusa, but it seemed like Stheno was in charge. That meant that either Medusa or Euryale was the one she was already trying to appeal to. Her money was on Medusa.

“Your sister’s right,” Paige said. “The laws haven’t quite caught up in our time. I’m guessing this is something you’ve only recently learned, Medusa?”

“This is all a little new to me,” the gorgon replied, confirming Paige’s guess. “I’ve only just returned. But I’ve seen some horrible things.”

“The world can be a horrible place.” Paige stepped forward, hoping that she was making some kind of connection. It was hard to tell since she was still avoiding looking directly at the gorgons’ faces. Piper and Phoebe were staying quiet, letting her work a different kind of magic. “But my sisters and I do what we can to change that. I hear you were a lot like us back in the day.”

“It would seem so,” Medusa said. “My sisters and I protected the defenseless with our own natural magic. It gave us purpose. Made us… heroes.”

“Until it was all ripped from us,” Stheno reminded her. “Until we were cursed with these horrible bodies.”

“I’m not going to act like I understand what you’ve been through,” Paige said. “But just because you’ve been cursed on the outside, doesn’t mean it has to change who you are on the inside. Don’t become the monster you were changed into. We can work this out. See that these people are brought to some sort of justice. You’d be surprised what can be done these days in the court of public opinion.”

“My sisters don’t trust you,” Medusa said. Her voice was softer, closer. Her shadow approached while her sisters stayed back. Paige wished she could see what they were doing, but she knew her own sisters had her back. If they got any closer, Piper and Phoebe would find a way to get her out of the path of trouble.

“I don’t trust your sisters either,” Paige said. No reason to lie. “But we’ve got to start somewhere.”

“You can look up,” Medusa said. “I won’t hurt you. I can control my power. It won’t do anything unless I choose to.”

Paige mentally kicked herself. She should have seen that coming. There was no better way to show trust than by looking directly into the eyes of a gorgon.

“Paaaaaaaige.” Phoebe’s voice was a warning.

Paige held up a hand to let her sisters know it was okay. She slowly raised her head until she was looking into the brown eyes of Medusa. Nothing seemed to be happening. She could still move. Paige smiled. “See? Trust.”

Medusa smiled as well. “That’s what I keep--” Confusion crossed Medusa’s face. She tilted her head like she was trying to figure something out. She wasn’t just looking at Paige any longer. She was examining her. Medusa’s tongue shot out, tasting the air like a snake. “Athena!”

Paige took a step back. “No! Not Athena! I’m Paige. Paige Matthews. I mean, yes, I did have her power for a brief time, but that was *years* ago. No Athena here anymore!”

“I can still taste her essence,” Medusa hissed. “She’s the one that started this. She’s a part of you.”

“Was a part of me,” Paige said, stepping back. “*Was*. Very brief time. Hardly a blip in my life.”

“Paige,” Piper warned.

Too late. Medusa's eyes flared. The brown eyes turned to something snake-like. A glow came from them and Paige felt her joints stiffening. "Not again!"

"She *is* getting stronger," Stheno said from a spot behind her sister. "I knew it."

Paige didn't care what the gorgon was talking about. She had other problems at the moment. Piper's hand was immediately in front of her eyes, blocking them from Medusa's line of sight. "Can you orb? Get us out of here."

"I'll… try." Paige concentrated on her power, calling on the orbs to form and take their bodies across the globe, or at least out of the stadium. The moment they did, Piper's power would deactivate and everyone would come out of their frozen state. They'd see a new statue in the middle of the field and a trio of monsters, one of which was moments from a rampage. She could not allow that to happen.

Tapping into her power, Paige directed it at the gorgons. She had to get them out of the stadium and send them some place where the people would be safe. It took longer than usual, but she eventually felt the familiar sensation of her magic taking hold. It caused her pain, but it worked. The gorgons were gone.

"I meant us, not them," Piper said, trying to sound light and airy.

"Working on it," Paige strained to say.

"What about statue dude?" Phoebe asked.

"Leave him," Piper replied. "I can't hold back this crowd forever. He can just be another viral whatever. How's it coming, Paige?"

"I think… I got it." Paige didn't know why she hadn't turned to stone yet, but she could still feel Medusa's magic coursing through her body. It was battling against her own powers, keeping her from orbing, but it felt like she was finally breaking through.

Paige slowly felt herself splitting into the familiar orbs and taking them all to safety.

CHAPTER 22

The tunnels were dark, but not nearly as dark as Coop would have expected. Parts of the Underworld were lit by supernatural light that the rocks emitted in the places where demons hadn't lit torches. Cole had said they were going to be a bit off the beaten path, which was fine with Coop. There was less chance they'd run into trouble that way.

"Thanks again for agreeing to be my guide down here," Coop said as he negotiated his way through the long shadows from the mystical cavern light. "If I tried to do this on my own I could be wandering around for years."

"No you wouldn't," Cole replied. "A Cupid down here by himself wouldn't last more than a week before something killed him. Though a Cupid your size might make it through two. We can't let this fallen Cupid break you and Phoebe up. Not on my watch."

"Thank you." Coop threw a more weight behind those two words than they probably needed, but he appreciated Cole's commitment in spite of the awkwardness of the situation.

Cole smiled. "I'm kind of surprised you haven't asked me if we're there yet."

"I'm assuming I'll know when we come across a river of the dead," Coop replied. "But now that you mention it, why do we have to walk down here at all? Why can't we just beam in at the edge of the river, fill my water bottle, and beam out?"

“Because we’re not dealing with a normal river,” Cole said. “It moves around.”

“The river moves around?”

“A little.”

“How?”

Cole stopped and shot him a look. “Magic?”

“Okay well, if the river moves around, how are we supposed to find it?”

“We’re not,” Cole said. “The River Styx is the place where lost souls are taken. So the only way to get to it is—”

“Don’t say it.”

“—by getting lost.”

“You demons can be a literal bunch,” Coop said.

Cole smiled. “You have no idea.”

“Just so I know what to look for,” Coop said as he worked his way through a tight space between the cave walls. “We *are* talking about an actual river, right? With water and everything?”

“Water, yes,” Cole replied. “Not much else. No fish. No plant life. Nothing much lives down here.”

“And it’s filled with lost souls?”

“Not that you’d see,” Cole said. “You’ll see.”

Coop wasn’t sure if it was the Underworld that was making Cole sort of playful with his riddles or if he was just happy to be getting out of the Nexus. He decided not to question it as he followed Cole through a few more caverns.

Just like back at the Manor, Coop found himself at a loss for conversation. He mainly took the time to check out his surroundings, such as they were. Beyond the mysterious ambient lighting, the cave tunnels they walked through weren’t particularly interesting. It was nothing more than one rock, followed by another rock, passing through a tight passageway into

a larger cavern. He was beginning to see why demons were so miserable all the time. Compared to Cupid's temple, this place was literally the pits.

"So, are we lost yet?" Coop asked after they passed through a cavern that looked exactly like the five prior caves they'd walked through.

"You see that river yet?"

"Not so much, no," Coop replied as a noise stopped him in his tracks. "But I do hear growling. Is that something we should be worried about?"

"It's actually a good sign," Cole said. "Means we're almost lost."

The caves had been completely silent since the men had materialized in one. Coop had hoped it would stay that way throughout their journey. The Underworld was vast. Different factions of demons and all manner of nightmarish creatures usually gave one another a wide berth, unless involved in some kind of power play. Cole had said that they'd be walking through some of the most uninhabited depths of the Underworld, which Coop had hoped meant that they would be able to get in and out without incident.

"The river growls?" Coop asked as the noise got louder. It was very clearly not the sound of rushing water.

"The creature that protects it does," Cole said. "Come on, Cupid. You should know this one. Cerberus exists in both Greek and Roman mythology."

Coop's jaw clenched. Of course he knew about the three-headed hellhound that guarded Hades. But since Hades didn't exactly exist in the way he'd learned about it, Coop never imagined for a moment that the creature did. "Nice of you to give me a heads up on that one," he said lightly.

Cole turned back so Coop would see his smirk. "Didn't want to ruin the surprise."

They followed the growls to their destination. Now that Coop knew what it was, he could make out the three distinctly different sounds from the multiple heads of the creature. The growls turned to beastly barking as Coop and Cole approached an opening in the tunnel. Cerberus must have caught their scent. So much for the element of surprise.

Coop raised his ring, bracing for an attack. Cupid rings weren't exactly filled with defensive power, but it was all he could think to do. Maybe he could use his magic to convince the different heads to fall in love with one another, allowing him to get a bottle full of the river while Cerberus fought over himself.

He didn't bother to share that idea with Cole

Cole had to give the Cupid credit. Most members of the magical community avoided the Underworld like the plague. Then again, certain sections of it did carry plagues so he could understand their reluctance.

The Charmed Ones and Leo never hesitated to go down there when the need arose, but Cole had expected Phoebe's current husband to at least show some trepidation. Maybe it was just wishful thinking on his part. But Coop was ready for anything, even the three-headed monster that, in all honesty, Cole had completely forgotten about until he'd heard the growling. As they came up on the river and Cerberus, Cole wasn't entirely sure of their plan of attack.

"Any tricks I should know about for getting past Cerberus?" Coop asked.

"You don't sing by any chance?"

"Sing?"

"You know," Cole said, stone-faced. "Music to soothe the savage beast."

Coop stared into Cole's eyes for a moment before the edge of his lip curled into a half-smile. "Very funny."

"Could be worth a try," Cole said. "You must know some lullabies."

Coop relaxed into a full smile, but didn't bother to comment. The light moment was nice until it was broken by a deeper noise somewhere beyond growling and barks as they approached their destination.

Cole could hear the river now, rushing through the echoing caves. He remembered the first time he'd heard that sound. A former cohort had pointed it out to him when they got turned around in the tunnels while on a mission for the Source. He'd expected the moans of lost souls to go with it, but it was only water. Not that he'd laid eyes on it at the time. His former associate had made sure that they steered clear of the river as they were already low on time. An attack from Cerberus would have thrown them completely off schedule.

Cole paused at the passageway he knew would open up into a large cavern and turned back to Coop, whispering: "You ready?"

The Cupid raised his glowing pink ring and his water bottle in response. It wasn't his first choice for weapons to take into a possible battle with a giant three-headed beast, but it would have to do. Cole waved Coop forward as they proceeded in silence. The longer they could go without attracting Cerberus's attention the better. The beast had already gotten their scent.

The cavern they entered was one of the most massive spaces Cole had ever seen in the Underworld. This part of the River Styx was wide as it rushed along the cave floor, entering from a spot far in the distance and disappearing down through a tunnel not too far from where the men stood. Cole briefly wondered if this large river actually continued through the Underworld, or if it only existed in this cave. It wouldn't be the first unsolved mystery he'd come across down there.

Cerberus was almost small in comparison to the river and cavern. But that was a deceptive scale. As the creature stood alert, all three heads growling, it was at least four times the Cupid's large size. The hellhound had not seen them yet, but the way his middle head sniffed the air while the eyes of the other two scanned the area it was clear that the beast knew they were in the vicinity. It was positioned by the narrowest part of the river, presumably protecting it from anyone who was going to attempt a crossing. That worked in their favor.

Cole stuck to the shadows as he led Coop to the bank of the river. Even with all the magical lighting in the cave, there was still plenty of darkness to hide them. Thankfully, the Cupid had doused the light from his ring, not wanting to draw any unwanted attention. They were heading for the point where the river was widest and the edge was closest to the many different tunnels along the wall. The thing about getting lost in the Underworld was that all roads eventually led to this spot, which was good because it gave them plenty of options for escape.

Once they reached the spot opposite where the river was widest, they could no longer hug the wall and stick to the shadows. This was the point of no return. They had to clear the distance to the river and back without attracting Cerberus's attention. With three heads maintaining vigil in every direction, it would be impossible.

Cole felt the water bottle pressing against his hand. He looked down to see that Coop was trying to hand it to him. When he looked back up, Coop motioned to himself, then the hellhound. Then he motioned to Cole with the water bottle. Once again, Cole had to give him credit. The Cupid was suggesting that he'd distract the dog while Cole got the water. Brave of him, but not very wise. The scent of Cupid magic in Coop would set Cerberus off. It was only luck that the dog hadn't honed in on it yet and ripped him to shreds.

While few members of the good magical community ever made it down to the Underworld, Cole doubted *any* of them made it this far. If Coop got any closer to that dog than he already was, it would tear him apart. But the scent of a dead former demon who had been lost in the void between life and death? That might just confuse Cerberus long enough to do the trick.

Without a word, Cole backed away. Coop's eyes went wide in warning as he realized what Cole intended, but the former demon moved too quickly for him. Cole was off and running for Cerberus before Coop could stop him.

The hellhound honed in on his strange scent as all three heads turned in Cole's direction. Cole shifted course. Instead of running for the dog, he made his way toward the river. A quick glance back was all it took to see that Coop was already on his way as well. All Cole needed to do was keep the dog busy. But how?

Cerberus leapt toward him, bounding across the distance faster than Cole had anticipated the large creature could move. Boulders crushed under the beast's feet while Cole quickly calculated his odds and his options.

The odds were bad. The options were few.

Actually, there was only one.

The snarling, drooling beast with three heads was almost on top of him, but Cole waited. He waited until he could see three sets of bloodshot eyes. He waited until he could smell the rancid breath. He waited until the moment Cerberus started to pounce, and then Cole made himself disappear in a blink. Two of the three heads slammed into the ground he'd been standing on a half-second earlier.

When Cole reappeared he was looking at the creature's hindquarters. Luckily this end only had one set, not three. And a long serpent-like tail that Cole hadn't anticipated. It whipped across the air wildly, as Cerberus tried

to regain its footing. Cole jumped the tail once, but missed it on its return. It clocked him in the head, sending him tumbling down to the ground

Once Cole could see clearly again, he didn't enjoy the view. Cerberus was fine. Standing tall on its feet again. All three heads, panting for breath, loomed large right above him.

Before Cole could determine where to send himself again, a pink flash of light burst through the dimly lit cavern, pulling Cerberus's attention. Two of the three heads twisted, while the third stayed focused on Cole. Whether the heads shared one brain or had three, Cole could see some kind of conflicted thought behind the eyes of the head staring at him.

The creature's legs blocked Cole's view of Coop, but he could see the flashes of pink glow all around them. And he felt the love too. Coop wasn't just tempting the beast away with a light show. He was making sure Cerberus knew what a tasty treat he would be. A Cupid in the Underworld was probably better than any old rawhide former demon that maybe didn't have much of a magical scent any longer.

Cerberus was gone after another pink flash, leaving only a trail of drool behind.

The beast bounded toward Coop as Cole tried to figure out what to do. If he let Coop die in the Underworld, Phoebe would kill him all over again. This time he was pretty sure it would stick.

Cole stood, but stopped himself from doing anything rash. The Cupid was a big boy. He could take care of himself. Cole just had to trust that Coop had a better plan than he'd had when he faced down Cerberus.

Cole watched as the hellhound bore down on Coop and then sailed right into the River of Styx with a huge splash. Coop was suddenly gone. Cole feared that the beast had taken him in as well, until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Good plan you had,” Coop said. He’d used the exact same teleporting trick as Cole. “I’ve found the easiest ones work best.”

Cole felt relief wash over him. At least now there was nothing he had to explain. “Did you get the water?”

Coop held up the bottle. Murky water from the River Styx sloshed around inside. Cole was glad that he wasn’t the one that had to drink it. “We can pick up the crystal goblet from Kama and figure out our next move.”

“Our next move is to jam it down Dafydd’s throat.” Cole saw the wet three-headed dog pulling itself out of the river behind Coop. “Actually, our next move should be getting out of here. Now.”

Coop looked around. “Can we?”

“We can.” Cole was glad that the same magic that kept anyone from materializing near the river didn’t stop them from getting away from it. He and Coop disappeared as the hellhound shook itself dry.

CHAPTER 23

“Were the gorgons there? Did you miss them?” Prue asked as her sisters appeared in the living room. She almost missed seeing *them* because they had orbed in on the other side of her new statue garden. She had to weave her way between the stone people to see the ones that could move, knocking into Paige in the process. She’d almost mistaken her youngest sister for a statue. Paige was standing so still.

“Paige, are you okay?” Phoebe had an edge in her voice.

That’s when Prue realized her mistake hadn’t been far from the truth. Paige’s body was still flesh, but she was as immobile as the statues around her.

“Can’t… put down my arms,” Paige said. Her legs weren’t moving either. “I can… wiggle… my fingers.”

“Can you activate your healing power?” Piper asked.

“I’ll try.”

While Paige worked her magic, Phoebe filled Prue in on all that she had missed. She’d already known about their fight with the Titans, but it was still a shock to find that something that had happened years ago while she was out of her sisters’ lives still had ramifications in the present day. Prue blamed herself once again for being so distraught that she’d been gone for so long. Grams and their mom never had a problem getting in touch with their living family members. Prue still couldn’t explain why her own death had hit her so hard. Aside from the obvious, of course.

Prue could only watch as Paige reached inside herself and tried to heal against the magic taking over her body. Her hands emanated a golden glow that she tried to direct inward. With her arms refusing to cooperate, she couldn't physically direct the power toward herself, but she tried to focus with her mind. "Only slowing things down."

Prue grabbed a bottle from the table. "Try the potion. See if it works."

"A little help," Paige said weakly.

"Oh. Sorry." Prue flushed with embarrassment. Paige had just said she couldn't move her arms. Prue took in the situation, unstopped the bottle and poured it over her sister's head. "Sorry about this."

"No problem," Paige grumbled as the liquid oozed over her. She closed her eyes while she still could so nothing got in.

"We'll fix your hair later," Phoebe added, which earned her a glare from both Paige *and* Prue.

As the potion dripped down Paige, she struggled to move her arms and legs, but Prue only saw the barest motion, and she wasn't even sure that that wasn't wishful thinking. "That… all we got?" Paige asked.

"It's the entire bottle," Prue said. "We didn't make any more since it was useless. I can get Frank and the fairy back. Maybe.

Piper took in the statues around them. "That hasn't been much of a success so far."

"Bad enough Paige is stuck like this," Phoebe said. "I don't think she needs a fairy buzzing around her head."

"True," Paige said.

Phoebe stepped up to Paige, examining her closely. Looking right into her eyes. Prue joined her as they both tried to see if there was any graying going on.

"Personal space," Paige said.

“Sorry,” Prue said as they both stepped back. “I was just wondering why you haven’t turned all the way to stone yet. I mean, before you started using your healing power.”

“It happened pretty fast in my vision with the congressman,” Phoebe added. “Those people in the shaky, blurry video got hit right away too.”

“Maybe because she’s a witch?” Piper suggested. “The other victims were mortals.”

“Turned to stone… fast… with the Titans.” It was getting harder to understand Paige. Her jaw wasn’t moving as much as it usually did when she spoke. Prue didn’t take that as a good sign.

“This must be a different magic,” Prue suggested. “You said your spell had worked back then.”

“Our magic worked yesterday morning too,” Piper reminded her. “We undid the spell on that congressman.”

“Stheno… getting… stronger,” Paige struggled to say.

“Stheno’s getting stronger?” That didn’t make any sense to Prue. According to Phoebe, Medusa had been the one to cast the spell on Paige.

“No,” Phoebe said. “Stheno said *she* is getting stronger. I’m guessing she was talking about Medusa.”

“Okay,” Prue said. “Then Medusa’s getting stronger. That still doesn’t explain why her power’s not strong enough to work against Paige.”

“Because it was just her and not her sisters?” Piper suggested. “But then why would she do it on her own. No, that can’t be it.”

“Maybe because she wasn’t trying to turn Paige to stone,” Phoebe said. “She was trying to attack Athena.”

Prue stared blankly at her. “I don’t get it.”

“Right before Medusa went all crazy eyes, I thought Paige was getting through to her,” Phoebe said. “I got the feeling that Medusa wasn’t the one behind this little escapade. Stheno seemed to be in charge. But then Medusa

sensed some residual Goddess of War on Paige and whatever progress had been made went out the proverbial window."

"Sit-ters."

"What was that, Paige?" Prue asked. "Sitters?"

"Sssssssss."

"I don't think she's referring to the snakes in Medusa's hair," Phoebe said.

Prue was pretty sure Phoebe was right. She was also confident that she knew what Paige was struggling to say. "Sisters!"

"Them or us?" Piper asked.

"But that's it!" Prue said. "That's the connection. We've been thinking of Medusa, Stheno, and Euryale as gorgons all this time."

"If you'd seen them at the stadium it would be pretty hard to think of them as anything else," Phoebe said.

"But they *were* something else," Prue said. "Before they were cursed. Frank said they were witches. Or implied they were. Three powerful sister-witches that worked for the Elders? Sound familiar?"

"You think they were Charmed?" Piper asked. "And that's the connection? That's why their magic isn't working on Paige."

"Not exactly," Prue said. "The prophecy said we're the most powerful witches of all time. Well, *we* were and now you all are. Either way, the 'of all time' part sounds kind of infinite to me. But I'm thinking they were something *like* us. Maybe a precursor to the Power of Three. That's why her magic doesn't fully work on Paige."

"And how does this help us?" Phoebe asked.

"It's elementary," Prue said, looking at Paige. "The Power of Three will set you free."

“Where are we?” Medusa demanded. A moment ago, they were inside that stadium and now they were in some kind of gray stone building with metal bars attached to the walls. The fact that the damned goddess hadn’t sent them down to Hades was no consolation for her actions now or in the past. “What did Athena do to us?”

“Her name is Paige, dear,” Euryale said. “That wasn’t Athena.”

“That horrible scheming goddess was in there somewhere,” Medusa insisted, the snakes in her hair spitting with a rage that drowned out all reason. “I could taste her.”

“We could have used this passion yesterday,” Stheno said. She was calmer than Medusa had seen her since her resurrection.

Medusa spun on her. “You knew! Don’t deny it!”

Stheno smiled. “I knew that she had been touched by the magic that made Athena who she was. But that was years ago. I honestly didn’t think the residual magic had stayed with her. I never imagined you would sense it. Of course, I might have if you’d told me you were back at your full strength.”

Medusa seethed with eyes glowing and snakes writhing around her head. “You do not want to see me at my full strength. Now tell me where we are.”

Stheno just stared smugly at her while Euryale provided the answer. “Far as I can tell, that witch sent us to Alcatraz. Former prison and current tourist trap. By the looks of the place, I’m guessing it’s closed for maintenance or something today. Or maybe we’re just in a closed off portion, though I can’t imagine the Charmed Ones sending us some place we could cause trouble. Usually mortals would be stumbling over us with their cameras.”

Medusa ignored most of what Euryale had said, focusing on the important part. “The Charmed Ones? You’ve called them that before. You

gave me the impression they were witches. Why would they possess the power of Athena?"

"Long story," Stheno said. "And not a very interesting one. The point is now that they know about us, they will do anything to stop us."

"Yeah," Euryale said to her eldest sister. "I thought you were taking care of that part."

Stheno's eyes narrowed. "This will be the last time I contract work out. From now on, we take care of our problems ourselves."

"Fine with me," Medusa said, the rage building in her. She might not have Athena in this era, but she had the next best thing. "And we start with the Charmed Ones."

"Much as I love this newfound commitment to our plan," Stheno said, "I don't know that it's the best way to allocate our resources. Now that your powers are back, we are at the strongest we've been in a very long time. We don't need to be together to turn people to stone permanently. We can go anywhere in the world! Do anything! We can change the very fabric of society."

"And the Charmed Ones will stop at nothing to make sure we don't do that," Euryale said. "Honestly, I think Medusa's on to something."

Medusa knew she was in trouble when Euryale was agreeing with her over Stheno. She also knew that her anger wasn't logical. This Charmed One wasn't Athena. She hadn't even been born when the curse took effect. But the rage Medusa felt was clouding her thoughts. She'd mistakenly believed that she had gotten past her anger, but all she wanted now was revenge. This Paige woman finally gave her an outlet for her emotions. And she wanted vengeance.

Thunder clapped outside the gray building, shaking the stone walls around them.

“That… sounded familiar.” Stheno pushed past Medusa, moving toward the small window.

“What is it?” Euryale asked.

Medusa was too busy trying to separate her anger from the rest of her confused emotions that she really didn’t care what her sisters had noticed. At least, not until Stheno was staring at her with a smile on her face unlike any Medusa had ever seen her wear.

“Do it again,” Stheno said.

“Do what?” Medusa hadn’t *done* anything.

“Get angry,” Stheno said. “Get *mad*. Think about Athena and the power she held over us. About that supposed ‘hero’ Perseus that killed you and took you from us. Rage against Poseidon for stealing your--”

A crashing thunder shook the very foundation of the building before a bolt of lightning blew out the window Stheno had been beside a moment earlier. Glass flew at them, but Euryale stopped it with a wave of her hand, changing the glass into butterflies that flapped their way through the bars, disappearing down the hall.

Both Stheno and Euryale laughed with glee as they took in the destruction of the window. Medusa blinked twice, afraid to believe what it could mean.

Stheno’s smile shifted into something darker as she raised a hand, gathering the moisture in the air above her palm before turning it into a ball of ice. “Our active powers have returned!”

It couldn’t be possible. Medusa refused to believe it. They were standing there in their gorgon bodies, snakes hissing on their heads. They weren’t witches any longer. They didn’t possess any magic beyond the parlor tricks Athena had gifted them with. And yet, the lightning Medusa had called down was not part of her curse. It came from before that time. “How?”

“Your rebirth,” Stheno said. “When we tapped into the magic of the Charmed Ones and the magic of the Nexus of the All, it changed us. We were connected with the most powerful witches of all time. It might have reawakened our powers too.”

“But we still bear the curse,” Euryale said, pointing to her face as if she needed to remind them.

In a blink, Stheno adopted her human form. “So what? It’s just another gift we carry. Turning people to stone can come in quite handy. And with our magic back, we can probably keep these glamours up indefinitely.”

Euryale let out a squeal, clapping her hands together as she changed her body. The outfit she wore this time fit her like a second skin. She had even worse shoes on that appeared to be made from the skin of snakes.

“But it’s not us,” Medusa said, sounding unsure of herself. If Athena’s curse could be subdued, she might be able to live a normal life. She might be able to move on. But even as she changed herself back into the form she’d been born into, she could still feel the snakes which now slumbered on her head. She could still feel the hate for Athena and for the woman alive today that had once tasted her power.

“But it *can* be us,” Stheno said. The sudden calm that came over her was even worse than Euryale agreeing with Medusa. “If tapping into the magic of the Charmed Ones and their sister is what brought our own gifts back to us, I wonder what would happen if we took *their* magic as well.”

CHAPTER 24

Coop watched as the residents of Grand Haven Retirement Village went about their late morning activities on the well-manicured grounds. A painting class had set up on the patio while another group played bocce on the lawn. Several other residents seemed to be taking leisurely strolls, but there was something very predetermined about their chosen routes. As nice as the “village” was, Coop couldn’t see himself ever moving into such a casually structured place, and that had nothing to do with his immortal status. “I don’t like this. I don’t like this one bit.”

“Yes, it is kind of a constricting way of life,” Cole replied, taking a sip from his drink. They waited in the gazebo for someone to either kick them out or ask them what they were doing there. So far, it has been a half-hour and not a soul had approached. “These people don’t seem to enjoy as much freedom as this community wants it to appear they do. And yet, it has a stunning lack of security.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.”

“I’m talking about your plan. I don’t like your plan.”

“I know,” Cole repeated. “You’ve made that perfectly clear the dozen other times you mentioned it. But it’s the best option we have for bringing Dafydd out into the open.”

“It seems wrong,” Coop said. “Manipulative. I would have preferred staking out Phoebe’s other couples and waiting for him to show up.”

“That’s probably because it *is* manipulative,” Cole said without a moment of hesitation. “Kama’s got the couples covered. Dafydd hasn’t gone near them. Hasn’t gone back to Piper’s restaurant either.”

“We’re putting people in danger,” Coop reminded him.

“Only for a moment,” Cole said. “As soon as he appears we grab him by the throat and beam him to Cupid’s temple where we can force that disgusting river water down his throat.”

“I don’t like that part of the plan either.” Coop said. “Let me try to reason with him first. He is the man who trained me. I don’t want to just grab him and force him to drink that swill. Maybe I can get through to him. I just don’t understand what would make him betray his calling like this.”

Cole looked skeptical. “Do you really need me to explain how love can make people do crazy things? Would you like me to cite examples?”

“That’s okay. I’ve heard the stories.”

“I will say it’s worse for people like us,” Cole added. “The ones who never die. Or at least exist for a very long time. You’d think that with so much time and so many different opportunities to fall in love that we’d be better at it. Have more experience. But that’s not the way it works out.”

“I didn’t really have any experience,” Coop admitted. “Not before Phoebe.”

Cole paused for a beat, looking him over. “That’s… sad.”

“Job hazard.”

Cole nodded like he understood. Coop assumed Cole’s former life as a half-demon came with enough hazards to put his to shame. Maybe complaining about his life to Cole Turner was not the most sensitive thing Coop had ever done. His mind went back to the thought that kept playing on repeat. “We should have thought this out more. It’s not… fair.”

Cole leaned forward in his seat. “You heard Kama. Stheno was the one who used her mythological connections to get access to the vault. *She* stole

the ring for Dafydd. They're clearly working together with him being some kind of distraction for the Charmed Ones. He's already affected Phoebe and Piper so you know what that means."

Coop sighed. "That Paige could be next. Which might mean an attack on her Charges or Magic School."

"I'm guessing that's going to be worse than breaking up some couples or making a few mortals sick."

Even though everything Cole kept saying was true—and he was saying it in the most direct way possible—Coop couldn't help but feel like it was coming out in a slightly condescending manner. Then again, Cole usually had that tone when he spoke, which made it difficult to read his true intentions.

As logical as the argument sounded, Coop still felt like this was not right. But none of that mattered because it had worked. Dafydd beamed in right beside the gazebo in a red glow much stronger than the pink light that Coop was used to.

"Where is she?" Dafydd demanded. "Where's Marsha?"

Coop and Cole were on their feet. They moved so fast that Cole lost his drink, sending the plastic cup spilling to the ground.

"She's not here, Dafydd," Coop said, trying to keep the situation from escalating. Coop hadn't seen his friend in decades, but time—and magic—had been kind to him. A little graying at the temples. A few wrinkles around the eyes. All in all, he looked very much like he did on the day he was stripped of his powers. Dafydd was no longer immortal, but he would enjoy a longer life than most people. There wasn't a crime Coop could think of that would force a Cupid to lose everything.

"Like hell she isn't," Dafydd replied. "I've still got friends in the magical community. I know you came here to move her some place safe." The Eros Ring sparkled on his finger, even when it wasn't active. Coop

could feel the emotions coming from it. He was surprised that it didn't have a calming effect on Dafydd. Perhaps because he'd only used it for evil purposes.

"She's been some place safe for over fifty years. Why would we move her now?" Cole's response saved Coop from having to admit his manipulation of the truth. "Those friends passed along the information we wanted you to have. It was the only thing we knew would bring you out of hiding."

It wasn't that Cupids couldn't lie, but Coop felt like he lost a part of himself every time he chose not to tell the truth. Honesty was at the core of any relationship. Even a lie made with the best of intentions told to someone who had done horrible things didn't change that. "I'm sorry, Dafydd. You gave us no choice."

"That doesn't mean much coming from the man responsible for destroying her life," Dafydd said. "Now you're even using her to betray me. You should be ashamed."

Cole laughed in a taunting way. "Wow. Demons have nothing on you when it comes to hypocrisy."

"Who the hell is this?" Dafydd said.

"A friend," Coop replied. It was the easiest explanation and one that he was finding truer with every passing moment. Cole looked a bit taken aback by the comment, but didn't say anything.

"Afraid to see me on your own?" the former Cupid asked.

Coop held out a hand. "We're here to help you, Dafydd. You need to return the Eros Ring."

"As soon as you take me to Marsha."

"You tried to destroy my wife's career and close my sister-in-law's restaurant to convince me you're worthy of Marsha's love? That's the most twisted--"

“I’m not interested in convincing you of anything.” Now Dafydd let out the taunting laugh. Coop thought it must be something they taught in villain school. The former demon and former Cupid were both skilled in that department.

It was interesting, this point that Coop had reached in his life. He was partnered with a former demon—his wife’s ex-husband—on a mission to stop his former mentor—a fallen Cupid—from destroying numerous lives. What odd set of circumstances could have ever brought him to this place? It was as much a question for his mentor as it was for him.

“What happened?” Coop asked. “What made you do it?”

“This woman came up to me and offered the ring in exchange for keeping your family occupied,” Dafydd said. “Once I knew it would hurt you, I was all in.”

“We figured that part out,” Coop said. “I mean, why did you use your Cupid ring to make Marsha fall for you when you knew she was destined for another? Why would you betray her like that? Why would you hurt her?”

“I didn’t hurt her,” Dafydd insisted. “You did when you reported it to our--”

“That is not an answer!” The group painting on the patio looked over at the sound of Coop’s raised voice. He smiled an apology their way before continuing in a more acceptable tone. “Pretending for a moment that her punishment was my fault, I wasn’t the one that forced her to feel an unnatural emotion. That was all you. And you knew what it would do to her. So, I want to know… why did you do it?”

Dafydd looked at Coop like he’d lost his mind for asking the most obvious question in the world. “Love.”

It was then that Coop accepted what Cole had been saying all along. After all this time, Dafydd still couldn’t even entertain the idea that what

he’d done was wrong. That what he was continuing to do by punishing Coop and his loved ones was a bad thing. He was never going to accept it. Dafydd really believed his twisted version of love justified his actions.

“Fine, Cole,” Coop finally said. “We’ll do it your way.”

Without another word, Cole reached out and grabbed Dafydd into a chokehold before teleporting him to Cupid’s temple.

Coop remained behind for a moment to make sure that no one had seen them disappear. The painters had returned to their easels. The bocce ball players were deep into their game. No one walking the grounds had noticed Cole’s sudden disappearance.

Truth be told, it had caught Coop off guard as well. To see Cole embrace violence so quickly even though the demon was long gone from his body was the most telling difference between the two men.

It wasn’t that Cole was evil anymore. He’d done more than enough to prove that since his return. But Cole lived by a different code, one that Coop would never embrace. But part of him—a small part—appreciated that aspect of Cole’s personality. It would be handy to have around when things got rough. As they often did when the Charmed Ones were around.

All along, Coop had been making it clear to Phoebe that he didn’t have any problems with Cole hanging around. Now, for the first time, Coop realized that he was actually kind of glad.

CHAPTER 25

“We tried the Power of Three spell earlier.” Phoebe formed a circle around Paige along with Prue and Piper. “What makes you think we’ll have any better luck now?”

“It *worked* earlier,” Prue countered.

“The *first* time. But it hasn’t worked since,” Phoebe reminded her.

Piper held up a hand in what had become her personal sign for her sisters to knock it off. “What are you thinking, Prue?”

“It’s possible that first Power of Three spell we did to unfreeze the congressman—the one that hasn’t worked since—might be somewhat to blame for all this.”

“How?” Phoebe asked.

“Don’t… care… try… it….” Paige’s skin was turning a deeper shade of gray. Her lips barely moved as she spoke.

Phoebe reached out and grabbed Prue’s and Piper’s hands. “Okay. Explanations later. We should do something before Paige loses the ability to speak.”

“Thank…”

“Save it.” Phoebe tried to be strong, but she was concerned that Paige would see the fear in her eyes. If this didn’t work, she didn’t know what they would do. Nothing had gotten those other statues to turn back to normal yet.

As one, the sisters took a breath and began to chant.

“The Power of Three will set you free.”

“The Power of Three will set you free.”

Phoebe was even more concerned that the spell would be useless since Paige’s nearly frozen contribution amounted to, “Power… three… free,” but she refused to give up hope.

“The Power of Three will set you free!”

The gray that was slowing taking over Paige’s already porcelain skin seemed to pause. And then it receded. Soon the color returned to Paige’s cheeks as she worked her jaw to make sure it could move. “*Much* better,” she said.

Phoebe sighed with relief before turning her attention to the other statues in the room. “Should we try it on them?”

Prue shook her head. “I mean, we can *try*, but I don’t think it will do any good. They aren’t witches. They’ve never been Charmed.”

Now Phoebe shook her head as well, but mainly in confusion. “Are you saying we’re related to that congressman we helped yesterday? Because if we are, I’m burning that family tree in the attic. It was never completely accurate anyway.”

“No. But I think when you used the Power of Three spell here and I tried to give it a Nexus boost, we might have done something else too. Something unintended. I think the gorgons might have tapped into our power somehow.”

“That sounds like a bit of a stretch to me,” Piper said.

“Oh, it completely is,” Prue admitted. “It’s a total stretch. But it’s the only thing that makes sense. Hear me out.”

“This should be good.” Phoebe took a seat on the couch and was quickly joined by Piper and the now mobile Paige.

Prue rolled her eyes in the general direction of her sisters. “What is this? Story time?”

“Oh! Popcorn would be great right now!” Phoebe said.

Prue ignored her, like she usually did in these situations. “It’s like Leo said: Everyone was convinced Medusa was dead. I think she was. I think her sisters brought her back from the dead. And they somehow tapped into our powers to do it.”

All three sisters opened their mouths to speak, but Prue silenced them with a glare.

“Think about it,” Prue continued. “Stheno was focused on Medusa being at full strength. But why? Why *wouldn’t* she be strong if she’d been alive all this time? And why are three figures from ancient Greece suddenly causing havoc in San Francisco of all places? If they can teleport anywhere, why only attack people in our hometown? Just think of the potential if they plopped themselves in the middle of DC. Why settle for one little congressman who is probably going to get voted out of office next time there’s an election?”

“Actually, the people in his district are kind of fans of his backwards ways,” Piper said.

“Not the point,” Prue said. “We need to start considering these sisters as the witches they once were and not the horrible monsters that—” Prue’s voice cut off as her eyes went wide in shock.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” a voice said from behind the couch. “We can be *both*.”

Phoebe, Piper, and Paige twisted around on the couch to find three strange women standing in the middle of Prue’s living room. They looked more like witches than the monsters that had been in the stadium, but the Charmed Ones didn’t have to guess who these uninvited guests were. The real question was how the hell they got into the Nexus uninvited.

Prue was the first to put their thoughts into words. “How the hell did you get in here?”

“You might be surprised to learn that we found a way to tap into the magic of your line.” The tallest of the women stepped forward. Her voice wasn’t as gravelly as in her monstrous form, but Phoebe was fairly certain that it was Stheno.

“Yeah. We figured that out *ages* ago,” Phoebe tossed off her obvious lie as she stood alongside Piper and Paige. With Prue to their side, she hoped they made for an impressive display of strength, though she doubted that three monster-witches who could magic their way into the Nexus of the All would suddenly be afraid of them.

“Aren’t they cute?” another gorgon said. This one Phoebe guessed to be Euryale. “And this place is *fabulous*. Do we get to keep it when we kill them?”

Medusa stepped forward, glaring at Paige. “Why aren’t you stone?”

Paige looked the gorgon right in the eyes. “Guess you’re not as strong as you thought.” It was a bold gesture, and Phoebe worried that her sister was tempting fate. If Medusa was growing more powerful, they didn’t need to be one sister down at the very start of this confrontation.

Stheno jumped in before her sister could reply or react. “You might be surprised by our strength.” Her hands went up and a chill wind blew through the living room. Icicles formed on the ceiling, growing into stalactites that came down to the floor behind Phoebe and her sisters, trapping them in front of a wall of ice.

Stheno had made sure that the Charmed Ones and Prue could not escape, not that they intended to. The couch stood between the two sets of sisters who stared at each other in classic showdown. But it was only there for a moment.

The couch that Prue had carefully designed broke into thousands of little blue marbles that rolled right out of the room. At first Phoebe thought

it was Prue’s doing, but her sister didn’t tend to make her furniture go away with such a flourish.

Prue took a single step forward and Phoebe braced herself for what was about to happen. “You want to see someone manipulate this environment?”

The living room started to shake, but only in the spot where the gorgons stood. The jerking grew so violent that it threw them to the ground. Stalagmites shot up from the floor around them, trapping them on all sides.

Medusa was first to get back to her feet. Her eyes began to glow.

“Don’t look!” Phoebe screamed as she quickly turned away.

A clap of thunder shook the entire castle as a crack of lightning burst through a window, smashing through the ice behind them. Phoebe and her sisters were knocked to the floor as they were showered in ice.

A second lightning bolt came at them from the other direction, but Prue brought a new wall up from the floor, placing it between them and the gorgons. It was roughly the width of the former couch, but it was enough to shield them for the moment. The wall trembled as it was struck again and again by Medusa’s lightning. A burn mark started to form in the center and Prue dropped another wall behind it just in time. Bits of burnt plaster exploded out from the first wall as the second began to warp from the middle almost immediately.

“We already know they won’t freeze. Maybe they can explode.” Piper stepped out from behind the wall and threw up her hands. She jumped back beside Paige a second later as lightning shot in her direction

“Nope,” Piper said between heaving breaths. “They don’t explode.”

The onslaught continued as Prue’s second wall continued to buckle from the power of the lightning. “I’m losing it!” Prue warned.

A blue glow enveloped the sisters as Paige’s orb shield formed around them. “Let it go! I’ve got us!”

As the second wall exploded, Phoebe thought she heard the familiar strains of a pop tune under the noise. Phoebe reflexively pulled out her phone. Coop was calling.

“Now?” Prue said. “This isn’t really the time.”

“Sorry.” Phoebe slipped it back into her pocket.

The sisters stood behind Paige’s shield, facing down the gorgons. All three sets of gorgon eyes were glowing, but the shield protected the Warren Witches from the magic.

“She’s more powerful than we thought,” Piper said.

“I thought they weren’t supposed to be witches anymore,” Paige said. “Wasn’t that part of the curse?”

“Side effect of tapping into our magic?” Piper theorized. “They might be getting that from us.”

Euryale waved a hand and the blue of the orb shield faded to clear before popping like a bubble. Without pausing, Paige grabbed onto all three of her sisters and orbed them out to the balcony behind them. “She changed my shield!” Paige said in a whisper so the gorgons didn’t know where they’d gone. “How did she alter my magic? I didn’t even know that could happen.”

“It has to be the connection,” Piper said. “There’s no telling how powerful they’ve become.”

Phoebe leaned over toward the glass door between the balcony and the living room. She took a peek, careful not to be seen. Euryale was redecorating, making all the furniture in the room melt while she searched for them. As if they would have hidden behind the sofa table. Then again, there were safer places to be than the balcony overlooking the desert sand in the middle of nowhere. The French Riviera came to mind.

Prue slipped in beside Phoebe to take a look as well. “If they’re using our magic to make them stronger, maybe we can use that against them.

Overload them."

"Give them *more* power?" Phoebe asked as they both leaned back. "I don't know about that plan."

"No," Prue said. "I think it will work."

"Okay, then," Piper said as she stepped toward the glass doors. "Let's do this!" If she couldn't work her magic on the gorgons, it was possible she could affect the magical environment they were in. With her hands up, Piper tapped into the magic of the Nexus and attacked it like she would a demon, blowing open the doors in a shower of metal and glass that flew toward the gorgons.

"Man, she knows how to make an entrance," Paige said as she followed her sister into the room.

Phoebe watched as Prue went next. She wasn't crazy about this plan, but it was the best they could come up with at the moment. She entered last to see that the room was completely bare. The very air was crackling with Medusa's lighting as Stheno's cold winds whipped through the air. Phoebe had to dive out of the way of the debris from the window as it blew out to the balcony, disappearing into nothingness as it flew beyond the perimeter of Prue's castle.

Lightning flared as Prue was suddenly at the center of a maelstrom. The walls and floor shifted and shook, throwing Stheno and Euryale to the ground. But Medusa remained standing, lightning crackling around her.

"Prue?" Piper asked, a note of warning in her voice.

"I got this!" Prue said as the entire castle rumbled and shook.

"Lightning!" Paige screamed as a bolt shot right toward Prue. It wasn't a warning. She used the power of her orbs to pull the electricity out of the air, sending it harmlessly into the desert.

"Don't stop, Medusa!" Stheno screamed as she pulled herself off the ground. "Destroy them, like Athena tried to destroy us."

Medusa's eyes went right to Paige, who did look away this time. "I'm not Athena!"

"There *is* a passing resemblance," Euryale noted.

"It doesn't matter who she is now!" Stheno shouted over the wind and rumbling of the building. "She was the Goddess of War once. She could be again. Kill her and we can control their magic. Then we can remake the world in *our* image. We can take control."

"If it's magic you want—" Prue raised her hands "—it's magic you'll get."

The castle shook harder as Prue made the walls shift. The room darkened as the lights dimmed around them. Vines crawled down the walls and dropped from the ceiling, moving for the gorgons with the speed of Medusa's lightning.

Euryale jumped in front of her sisters, waving her hands in every direction. The vines coming for them shifted into gauzy strips of fabric before disappearing.

Prue countered, opening up the floor beneath the gorgons, dropping them into the darkness beneath. They were back a moment later, rising up on a platform of ice growing from Stheno's hands.

Prue was relentless, using the very building against them. Three of the four walls around the gorgons compacted into a box, with a fourth wall magically appearing and slamming them into a small, windowless prison. For a brief moment, there was silence. The winds had stopped. The building was still.

In the silence, Phoebe could both hear and feel her phone as it vibrated in her pocket. A text was coming in. *Now?* Was it Coop again or someone else? If it was Coop, it might be important. She didn't want to take her eyes off the danger, but she had to know. Phoebe quickly slipped the phone out for a glimpse.

It *was* Coop. And the text provided everything she needed.

Before she could share the news with her sisters, the small prison began to tremble. Thunder and lightning burst from the box as it exploded, sending pieces of wall in every direction. Phoebe and her sister dropped to the floor to avoid the debris.

“This isn’t working.” Paige spoke over the sound of the icy winds that Stheno was forming once again. Phoebe could barely hear her. They’d gotten separated in the explosion. Phoebe was closer to the gorgons than she was to her sisters. She couldn’t let the enemy know what she’d learned. Not yet, anyway.

“They’re matching me power for power,” Prue said. “How is that possible? We’re on the Nexus.”

“So are they,” Piper said. “As long as they’re here, they might be as strong as us. Overloading them might not work.”

“Now she tells me,” Prue said.

Medusa was approaching Paige, eyes glowing with rage.

“Yes, sister!” Stheno shouted behind her. “Do what you were made to do!”

Medusa’s step faltered almost imperceptibly. Phoebe would have missed it, had she not been looking right at the floor beneath the gorgon’s feet at the time. She took the risk and raised her eyes to Medusa’s face. Behind her glowing rage, there seemed to be a slight bit of confusion. And maybe some hesitation.

It might be enough.

Phoebe was back on her feet, moving with speed. She held up her hands, coming up with her most insane plan on the fly. She’d never used her power like this before, but if there really was a connection between them, it might just work.

“Medusa!” Stheno called out a warning as Phoebe approached, but it was too late. She already had her hands around the gorgon’s head. At this proximity, she could hear the hissing snakes hidden beneath Medusa’s dark hair.

“It’s okay, little snakies,” Phoebe said. “I’m not planning to kill her. Just make her see.”

Phoebe focused her mind on Paige, pulling images from the past to fill her own mind, hoping to share them with Medusa. She remembered some of her sister’s most heroic deeds and the work of the Charmed Ones as well. Phoebe filled her mind with images of some of their greatest battles, and all the Innocents they’d protected—both during their time with Paige, and the early days with Prue. Then she pulled up her most recent images with all four sisters working together. If that didn’t convince Medusa they were on the side of good, then nothing would.

Lighting danced around the two of them, but it wasn’t attacking. If anything, it was keeping Medusa’s own sisters at bay. The glow in Medusa’s eyes dimmed, but still not enough to invite anyone to look directly at her.

“I get premonitions,” Phoebe said into Medusa’s ear. “I can see the future and the past. I don’t need to use my abilities to know that you’ve been badly hurt. What happened to you was horrible. But it wasn’t my sister’s fault. She’s one of the good ones. We all are. Just take these images to see what we have done. We didn’t hurt you. The people frozen here in stone aren’t to blame either.”

“*Everyone* is to blame!” Stheno called out through the crackles of lightning. “Everyone who didn’t act to stop it. The people who shared your story over the centuries, turning you into the monster.”

“Yeah,” Phoebe agreed as the lightning diminished. “That sucks too. But acting like a monster isn’t the best way to prove them wrong.”

“But it’s a good way to make them listen,” Euryale added. “Stheno was right. It’s the really horrible people that get all the press these days.”

The glow left Medusa’s eyes as they filled with even more confusion. Now, Phoebe was confident enough to look right at the gorgon. Even if Medusa tried to activate her magic, Phoebe felt secure that she could counter it. The feeling wasn’t logical, but it made sense to her. The lightning was completely gone. The castle was still. Prue had stopped her attack as well.

“Your sister’s right,” Phoebe said, calmly, as if they were having a simple conversation. “It does seem that way. If we hadn’t been working to stop you the world would know about you by now. They would think of you as monsters.”

“But they would have heard us,” Stheno insisted. Her voice was lower, but no less intense. “They would have feared us.”

“But not respected you,” Phoebe said.

“But they would have *listened*,” Stheno insisted. “And that was the point.”

“Yes. It was.” Phoebe nodded and smiled. Stheno had given her the exact opening she needed. “It was all about getting your message out, wasn’t it? We noticed the connection between your victims. People who used their own mortal powers to oppress others. To hurt womankind. We saw what you were doing.”

“And the world would have seen it too, if you hadn’t stopped us,” Stheno added.

“Yes, they would have,” Phoebe replied, speaking directly to Medusa. “But at what cost? Making yourselves into the monsters people have believed you were for thousands of years. Monsters on the outside as well as the inside.”

“We’re not monsters,” Medusa said in a whisper.

Phoebe took a step forward. “I don’t think you are. I don’t think your sisters are. I think the anger you all feel is justified. I understand how it grew over time with your sisters. I get how your early death kept you from processing it all properly. But that doesn’t justify turning people to stone. Making other people afraid. And it certainly is no excuse for what your sister did to us.”

“Did you to?” Medusa glanced back to Stheno.

Phoebe fought the smile forming at her lips. It was just as she suspected. Medusa didn’t know. “I just got a message from my husband,” Phoebe said. “You may not know this, but some really bad things have been happening to us lately. My sister and I… our careers were put in jeopardy. Innocents were hurt.”

“We needed a distraction,” Stheno explained, unprompted. There was no regret in her tone. “We did what we had to do.”

“Including partnering with someone who did exactly the thing you claim to loathe,” Phoebe said. “A man who used his own powers to force a woman to love him. And in the process he destroyed her life.”

Phoebe shared the story of Dafydd and his twisted love, pointing out that Stheno hadn’t seen fit to turn him to stone. She’d embraced his powers and used them for her purposes. By the time Phoebe finished, the confusion was gone from Medusa’s eyes. So was the rage. All that seemed to be left was regret.

Medusa turned to her sisters, but Stheno knew enough not to speak.

The same could not be said for Euryale. “Like we said, it’s the horrible people that get all the press these days.”

It was over in a flash. One moment Stheno and Euryale were standing there in the flesh and the next they were stone. There wasn’t even time for the shock to register in their eyes.

EPILOGUE

Phoebe finished giving her column one last review before sending it off to Elise. It was the second day in a row that she'd come in right under deadline, but recent events justified another piece to address the PR issue of her couples breaking up. Not that she could explain it any more today than she could the day before. But she put her tablet down on the nightstand feeling optimistic that the crisis had been averted. Mika could focus on the next one. Hopefully in a section of the newspaper far from *Ask Phoebe*.

The good news was that the full Cupid force was in on the case, working to undo the damage Dafydd had created with the Eros Ring. Without his magical influence, all the couples that had broken up would have the chance for reconciliation. It wouldn't be easy. Things had been said and done that could not be easily undone. But with the guiding hands of some of the best in the business, Phoebe was sure most, if not all, of the couples would be back together soon. Though she did worry for the poor movers who were going to have to get Bri back into her house on that hill.

"*That* was not fun," her harried husband said as he came into the room and collapsed on the bed, making it shake violently. "As soon as I got Parker to sleep, P.J. wanted a glass of water. When I got back with the water, Parker was crying because… I still haven't figured it out, actually. And that just set off a chain of events that I can't even begin to explain. How do those two small bodies get packed with so much energy?"

Phoebe kissed her husband as he climbed up beside her. "I'll put them to bed tomorrow night. You've certainly earned your keep today. Thanks for

all your help with the other thing too."

"It was the least I could do," Coop said as he snuggled in beside her. "Dafydd's actions weren't my fault, but they were my responsibility."

"Just like Medusa and her sisters," Phoebe said. "Now that she's not under their influence, I think she'll be able to get the help she needs. The Elders are going to look after her for a while. And I'll be checking in with the Elders to make sure she's getting the help that she needs from them since they were kind of the ones that started all this in the first place."

"And her sisters?"

"They're going to stay statues for a while," Phoebe said. "Until Medusa can figure out how to help them as well. Then she'll turn them back like she did all the other people."

"Elise is still going with a viral marketing campaign in the paper?" Coop sounded slightly disappointed by the lie.

"I know," Phoebe said. "She's not crazy about it either, but she can't really report the truth. That's the story her reporter submitted so that's what she accepted. A series of viral marketing campaigns meant to get people talking. Since none of the people who turned to stone had any clue what happened to them, they all went along with it so they didn't look foolish. It did kind of give them some publicity. What that publicity accomplished, I don't know, but people are talking."

"Not about what Stheno wanted," Coop said.

"Medusa's going to see to it they start," Phoebe said. "The thing about her sisters living so long is they've amassed quite a fortune of their own. Medusa's going to try to put some of that to good use. Using mortal means to get a message of empowerment out."

"At least something good will come out of all this," Coop said.

"I'm still not sure how the gorgons could access our power," Phoebe said. "It's not like the Warren line goes back that far. Or maybe it does."

“Ancient magic is all connected to what we have today,” Coop said. “Time isn’t so linear when it comes to those things.”

“Still, I wonder if somewhere back through history we might be related. Like Medusa’s a way, way distant cousin or something.”

“Go back far enough and I think most of us are related somehow,” Coop said.

“It could be possible I have a small amount of Greek in me.”

Coop smiled flirtatiously. “I do find Greek women sexy.”

“You’re a Cupid. You find all women sexy.”

“All people, really,” Coop said. “Cupids are very open.”

Phoebe ran her fingers up his arm. “You’re very loving.”

“Cole was a big help today too.”

Phoebe stopped what she was doing and pulled away from him slightly. “A Cupid should be better at setting the mood.”

Coop laughed, lightly. “Sorry. Still got a lot on my mind. I’ve never been crazy about Cole’s way of doing things, but love can’t heal everything I guess. I’m not sure what Dafydd’s punishment will be, but a tribunal has been called to decide it.”

Phoebe nodded. “Hard to punish someone who has been living in a self-created punishment for decades.”

“True.”

Phoebe moved closer to her husband again, putting her arm around his chest. “I love you, you know?”

Coop wrapped an arm around her as well. “I know,” he said. “I love you too.”

Phoebe and Coop settled into one another, enjoying a simple shared moment of two people who were together in every possible way.

It was a brief moment before the crying screams of two restless children pulled them both out of bed, but it only grew when they held those children

in their arms, enjoying the bond of a loving family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Ruditis has written numerous companion books and novels for TV shows like *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Star Trek, The Walking Dead,* and *The West Wing*. He has co-authored both of the official *Charmed* episode guides and has written several earlier *Charmed* novels, as well as the *New York Times* bestselling comic book series revealing the show's "unaired" ninth season.

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EPub Edition February 2016 ISBN: 9781443448772

Published by HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, by arrangement with CBS Consumer Products Inc.

First published by HarperCollins Publishers Ltd in serial form, as four separate ePub editions, in 2015.

First published by HarperCollins Publishers Ltd in this single volume ePub edition in 2016.

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HarperCollins Publishers Ltd
2 Bloor Street East, 20th Floor
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
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